

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS: CANDIDATE FORUMS



Below are sample questions for local, state, and federal candidates on social justice issues including climate change and the environment, criminal justice reform, economic justice, gun violence prevention, health care, immigration, Israel, LGBTQ rights, refugees, reproductive rights, and transgender rights.



Treat each sample question as a starting point that you can adapt to reflect the needs of your community and the role and responsibilities of the particular office that the candidates attending your forum or debate are seeking to fill. You can supplement the questions with data and statistics about that issue in your own town or state to make it more relevant.



As always, be sure to remain nonpartisan when asking questions. One of the factors the IRS can use to determine whether an organization has violated IRS rules is “Whether the candidates are asked to agree or disagree with positions, agendas, platforms or statements of the organization.” This means that you should not ask candidates to agree or commit to a position that your congregation supports. You can certainly ask pointed questions about specific issues, but they should be unbiased and straightforward. Avoid asking leading questions or questions that fall on strictly partisan lines. The goal of your event and the questions you ask is to educate your audience members about the views, positions, and values of the candidates.

### Climate Change and the Environment

Human emissions of greenhouse gases, primarily through the burning of fossil fuels, are making long term changes to the climate of our planet by raising the average global temperature.<sup>i</sup> Just last fall we saw the devastating effects of a series of hurricanes and wildfires in California and the West, disasters which we expect to become more common as our climate continues to change. Although climate change affects everyone, it hurts the most vulnerable amongst us the most; low-income communities and communities of color bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of climate change.<sup>ii</sup> We see a similar disparity internationally. One international report estimates that climate change causes an average of 400,000 deaths per year, 83% of which are in developing countries.<sup>iii</sup> Although the United States is home to only 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. is responsible for almost a third of the world’s total greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>iv</sup>



Questions for congressional, state and/or local-level candidates:

- What are your policy priorities when it comes to climate change, in terms of emissions, impact, and adaptation?
- The Paris Agreement is the most recent international climate change agreement with 195 countries signed on. In the fall 2017, the President announced his intention to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement.
  - *For federal offices:* What are your views on the U.S.'s role in international climate change agreements, including the Paris Agreement?
  - *For local/state offices:* What role, if any, do you see our city/state playing in the international effort to address climate change?
- Within the past year and a half, the President signed an executive order shrinking Bears Ears National Monument by 85% and Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument by 50%.<sup>v</sup>
  - *For federal offices:* What are your views on federal protections for public lands and national monuments?
  - *For local/state offices:* How would you respond to efforts by the federal government to shrink or roll back protections for national monuments in our state?
- Many proposed plans to prevent the effects of climate change involve rapidly moving to sources of energy that do not emit greenhouse gases. What are your views on the types of energy our country/community should be using?

## **Criminal Justice Reform**

Today, over 2 million people are behind bars in the United States, an increase of 1.9 million since 1972. “Tough on crime” law enforcement and sentencing policy adopted in the 1980s dramatically increased incarceration rates in the U.S., particularly among people of color, quadrupling the number of prisoners per capita in the United States.<sup>vi</sup>

Many states have curtailed strict sentencing laws, reduced prison populations, and consequently, saved taxpayer dollars. Likewise, many members of Congress support comprehensive criminal justice reform.

Questions:

*For sheriff candidates (compiled by Rabbi Suzanne Singer) –*

- Over the past 40 years, the number of incarcerated people in the United States has increased by 500%, to the point where 2.2 million people are in our prisons and jails today. In your opinion, what role should law enforcement play in successfully promoting public safety in the



community? How does the rate of incarceration affect the safety and wholeness of the community?

- The Bureau of Justice Statistics has found that inmates released from state prisons have a [five-year recidivism rate](#) of 76.6%.<sup>vii</sup> Is recidivism reduction a goal of the sheriff? If yes, how do you propose to accomplish this? If no, why?
- What is your view of alternatives to incarceration, such as diversion into mental health or addiction treatment programs, as a way of promoting public safety?
- According to The Sentencing Project, black people in the United States are incarcerated in state prisons at more than five times the rate of white people.<sup>viii</sup> To what do you attribute this gap? Do you plan to address the racial disparity in incarceration? If so, how?
- In what ways does the use of force policy for local law enforcement encourage trust between police officers and the communities they serve? Are there ways you would suggest changing or improving these policies?

*For judges –*

- Research shows that a disproportionate number of incarcerated juveniles and adults in U.S. prisons (i.e. criminal justice facilities) are persons of color. Do you believe there is anything within the appropriate role of a criminal court judge to address this disparity?
- What is your opinion on the value and impact of our community's money bail system? What factors should judges take into account when making a decision about a defendant's pre-trial status? When is an alternative to imposing money bail, such as releasing a defendant on their own recognizance, acceptable?
- What is your opinion on programs that divert those accused or convicted of crimes into mental health facilities, addiction treatment programs or other forms of supervision instead of jail or prison?

*For district attorneys –*

- Over the past 40 years, incarceration in the United States has increased by 500%, to the point where there are 2.2 million people in our prisons and jails today. In your opinion, what role should law enforcement play in successfully promoting public safety in the community? How does the rate of incarceration affect the safety of the community?
- What is your opinion on the value and impact of our community's money bail system? When is an alternative to imposing money bail, such as releasing a defendant on their own recognizance, acceptable?
- District attorneys can often use their discretion when deciding what crimes to charge a defendant with and how severe of a sentence to seek from a judge. What factors would you take into consideration when making these decisions?



- What is your view on the role district attorneys should play in prosecuting cases involving use of force by local law enforcement?
- In your view, how important is it that district attorneys have strong relationships with the communities they represent? What steps do you propose to develop those relationships, particularly among communities that are most affected by incarceration?

## Economic Justice

Poverty remains widespread within American society. Over 40 million people, or 12.7% of Americans, continue to live below the federal poverty line.<sup>ix</sup> That includes 15 million, or 1 in 5, children.<sup>x</sup> About the same number—41 million Americans—were food insecure at some point in 2017. And for households with children, the rate is even higher: 16.5%, with nearly 13 million children living in food-insecure households.<sup>xi</sup> Simultaneously, some government officials are seeking to shrink longstanding government anti-poverty programs, including support for nutrition, housing, protections for workers, and more.

### Questions for congressional, state and/or local-level candidates:

- What steps, if any, will you take to address poverty in our community/city/state/country?
- Do you believe the local/state/federal government should play a role in helping reduce inequality in our community and country? If so, what? If no, why?
- Is addressing childhood hunger a priority for you? If so, what policies do you support to reduce childhood hunger in our communities? If no, why not?

## Gun Violence Prevention

Over the last year, our nation has witnessed three of the deadliest mass shootings in modern American history. Every day, 96 Americans are killed and 200 more are injured by guns. Every year, 30,000 Americans die from gun violence, and the rate of gun violence in the United States is up to 25 times higher than other developed countries.<sup>xii</sup>

In the aftermath of the tragedy in Parkland, students across the country demanded reform. Since then, many states have passed strong gun violence prevention policies – such as universal background checks, assault weapons bans, and red flag laws, although Congress has not yet enacted similar legislation.



Questions for congressional, state, and/or local-level candidates:

- What steps do you support, if any, to prevent both mass shootings and everyday gun violence in our country?
- What is your position on universal background checks and banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines?
- What kinds of policies would you support to address handgun violence?

## Health Care

30 million Americans lack health insurance, and millions more receive inadequate care or cannot afford their costs. Elected officials at all levels are divided on the future of health care in this country. This White House has [cut open enrollment assistance](#) and has sought to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Some states have focused on expanding Medicaid, and others have begun the process for [imposing work requirements on their Medicaid programs](#). Some members of Congress [want to try to repeal the ACA once more](#), while others have introduced policies to expand the government's role in providing health care.

Questions:

*For congressional state, and/or local-level candidates –*

- 30 million Americans are uninsured, and millions more pay high rates for care or receive care they deem unsatisfactory. Is this a problem for the country? If so, what policies do you support to address these issues?
- What is your position on the federal government's role in directly administering health care, such as through a single payer system, public option, or Medicaid expansion?<sup>xiii</sup> What role do you see for state governments in the provision of our health care system?
- Several states have submitted waivers to place work requirements on their Medicaid programs. What is your stance on this?
- What steps, if any, will you take to address health inequities for people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, people with disabilities, and other marginalized communities?

*For state-level candidates in states that have [not adopted Medicaid expansion](#) –*

- What is your stance on expanding Medicaid as outlined by the Affordable Care Act?



## Immigration

There are approximately 11 million undocumented people in the United States.<sup>xiv</sup> Within the past year, the U.S. has terminated the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, ended Temporary Protected Status for several nations, and increased the number detentions and deportations of immigrants. The termination of DACA in September 2017 put nearly 800,000 immigrant youth at heightened risk of deportation.<sup>xv</sup>

### Questions:

#### *For congressional candidates –*

- What is your position on comprehensive immigration reform?
- What is your position on offering a pathway to citizenship for individuals who have fallen out of or who will soon lose legal status due to the termination of the DACA program and Temporary Protected Status?
- How do you recommend that the federal government address those who have historically benefitted from the DACA program?

#### *For law enforcement candidates –*

- What role do you see local law enforcement agencies playing in the enforcement of immigration law, particularly regarding the sharing of information and resources with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)?
- What is your position on law enforcement agencies providing a resident's immigration status with federal immigration authorities, including the immigration status of those being held under arrest, those incarcerated, crime victims and cooperating witnesses?
- What is your reaction to reports of ICE agents not identifying themselves, or identifying themselves as police officers, during enforcement actions? If ICE were to do this in your jurisdiction, how would you address the situation?

#### *For state and local legislature candidates –*

- What role, if any, do you see the local/state legislature playing in providing financial aid to our state colleges and universities for undocumented students who have attended high school in our state?
- What is your position on providing driver's licenses to residents regardless of immigration status?
- What role do you see local law enforcement agencies playing in the enforcement of immigration law, particularly regarding the sharing of information and resources with ICE?



## Israel

The United States and Israel have long had a strong, mutually beneficial relationship rooted in shared values and interests. Israel is of strategic importance to the U.S. Since the U.S. became the first country to recognize Israel following its declaration of independence in 1948, the U.S. has continued to play a key role in Israel's history, including facilitating peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbors. The U.S. also provides important military aid to Israel, the vast majority of which is spent on purchases from U.S. companies.

### Questions for congressional candidates:

- What do you see as the core principles of the U.S.-Israel relationship?
- What role, if any, do you think the U.S. should play in Israeli-Palestinian peace process?
- What are your views on how to achieve lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians?
- What is your position on the U.S. military aid to Israel?

## LGBTQ Rights

Over the past several years, the courts, as well as local, state, and federal legislatures, are applying the principles of equality to sexual orientation and gender identity. For instance, the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court case made marriage equality the law of the land. Public support for marriage equality is now over 60%.<sup>xvi</sup>

However, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals persists. Federal law lacks protections against LGBTQ discrimination in several areas: employment, housing, health insurance, the justice system, and others. Since the recognition of marriage equality, more than 100 anti-LGBTQ pieces of legislation have been introduced in states across the country.

### Questions for congressional, state, and/or local-level candidates:

- What steps, if any, will you take to ensure full equality for LGBTQ people in our community?
- What are your views on publicly funded child welfare agencies taking into account the faith or sexual orientation of prospective adopters?
- Across the country, states have passed bans on conversion therapy, or the practice of subjecting LGBTQ people – especially youth – to practices that suggest one's gender identity or sexual orientation can be "converted." Where do you stand on conversion therapy?

## Refugees

More than 65 million people worldwide have had to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution, surpassing the number of refugees from World War II.<sup>xvii</sup> The number of refugees in the



world has skyrocketed by more than 50% since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011.<sup>xviii</sup> Current refugee resettlement policies in the United States, including the refugee admissions cap of 45,000 for fiscal year 2018 and the varying executive orders restricting travel from predominantly Muslim-majority countries, are impacting the U.S.'s ability to respond to the worst global refugee crisis in recent history. Half way through fiscal year 2018, the United States has resettled fewer than 10,000 refugees.<sup>xix</sup>

Questions for congressional candidates:

- What role should the U.S. play in resettling refugees?
- What is your position on funding for humanitarian aid and regional security and protections for countries that have faced a natural disaster or face ongoing violence, such as Syria?
- What is your position on including race, religion, or national origin as factors in U.S. immigration and refugee resettlement policy?

## Reproductive Rights

Access to abortion services today is limited by factors such as geography (including lack of nearby clinics and state laws) and income (which is often linked with whether or not insurance covers abortion). On the federal level, the Hyde Amendment bars federal dollars from paying for abortions, meaning that people who use government-funded healthcare cannot have abortion services covered by their insurance. Recently, the federal government allowed employers and insurance companies to not cover birth control if doing so conflicted with their religious beliefs and has proposed barring federal funds from going to groups that perform or discuss abortion as part of family planning and sexuality education. In states, restrictions like state-mandated counseling, waiting periods, parental involvement requirements and gestational limits have increased in recent years. Reproductive rights remains a deeply contentious topic all over our country.

Questions:

*For congressional, state and/or local-level candidates:*

- What are your views on a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion?
- What is your position on various state-level restrictions to abortion, like gestational limits and targeted regulation of abortion providers?
- What are your views on abstinence-only sexuality education?





*For congressional candidates:*

- What is your position on the restriction of federal funds for abortion services, known as the Hyde Amendment?

## **Transgender Rights**

“Transgender” is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned to them at birth. “Gender non-conforming” is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to societal expectations surrounding gender.

Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals face discrimination in employment, housing, education, and other facets of daily life, as well as high rates of mental health issues. The transgender and gender non-conforming community, part of the larger LGBTQ community, faces many unique challenges.

### Questions:

*Education policy-specific questions for candidates for School Board, State Education Board, etc. –*

- The Obama administration asserted that Title IX protects gender identity, which ensured that transgender students could use facilities consistent with their gender identity and receive an education appropriate to their experience. The Trump administration rescinded that guidance. This has left it up to local school officials to clarify policies related to transgender students. Where do you stand on the Title IX guidance?
- What are your priorities in terms of school policies that impact transgender and gender non-conforming students?

*For candidates for Insurance Commissioner (only applicable to California, Georgia, Kansas, and Oklahoma):*

- The insurance commissioner can affect the health care that transgender and gender non-conforming people receive, in general, and as part of their gender transition (if applicable). What are your policy priorities regarding transgender and gender non-conforming people?

*For all candidates:*

- The Obama administration asserted that Title IX protects gender identity, which ensured that transgender students could use facilities consistent with their gender identity and receive an education appropriate to their experience. The Trump administration rescinded that



guidance. This has left it up to local school officials to clarify policies related to transgender students. Where do you stand on this Title IX guidance? What policies do you support that directly affect transgender students?

- The federal government has eliminated several protections concerning transgender and gender non-conforming people, ranging from the transgender military ban to school-related policy. What policies will you support that concern transgender and gender non-conforming constituents?
- Several states currently prohibit Medicaid from covering transgender-specific health care procedures. What is your position on including such health care costs in Medicaid?
- Crimes committed against transgender people are on the rise across the country, according to the latest data we have from the FBI. What steps, if any, will you take to combat these crimes committed against transgender people?



<sup>i</sup> EPA. “Climate Change: Basic Information.” <https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climatechange/climate-change-basic-information.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Goldenberg, Suzanne. “Climate change: the poor will suffer most.” <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/31/climate-change-poor-suffer-most-un-report>

<sup>iii</sup> DARA: <http://daraint.org/climate-vulnerability-monitor/climate-vulnerability-monitor-2012/report/>

<sup>iv</sup> Gillis, Justin and Popovich, Nadja. “The U.S. Is the Biggest Carbon Polluter in History. It Just Walked Away From the Paris Climate Deal.” <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/01/climate/us-biggest-carbon-polluter-in-history-will-it-walk-away-from-the-paris-climate-deal.html>

<sup>v</sup> Turkewitz, Julie. “Trump Slashes Size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Monuments.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/trump-bears-ears.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-zoukis/report-documents-us-recid\\_b\\_9542312.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-zoukis/report-documents-us-recid_b_9542312.html)

<sup>viii</sup> [www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/](http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/)

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2017/demo/p60-259.html>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=84972>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://news.gallup.com/poll/233597/uninsured-rate-rises-states-2017.aspx>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states#Unauthorized>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2016/10/18/146290/new-study-of-daca-beneficiaries-shows-positive-economic-and-educational-outcomes/>

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>

<sup>xvii</sup> UNHCR: Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2015, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unhcrsharedmedia/2016/2016-06-20-global-trends/2016-06-14-Global-Trends-2015.pdf>

<sup>xviii</sup> UNHCR: Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2015, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unhcrsharedmedia/2016/2016-06-20-global-trends/2016-06-14-Global-Trends-2015.pdf>

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>