

Debate in a Box — a citizen-run all-candidates assembly

One ward. Every registered candidate, invited on identical terms. One room — a library, a school gym, a community centre, a congregation hall — running this in its own name, before the vote.

Kids welcome. Food shared. Nobody pays.

Why this, why now

Seven in ten Torontonians stayed home last municipal election. Some wards this year will field only one, two, or three candidates for the seat — which makes hearing them, side by side, in one room, on equal terms, one of the cheapest civic goods a neighbourhood can produce. Nobody needs permission to do this. A room that already exists, run by people the ward already trusts, is all it takes.

This room does not endorse anyone. It does not rank anyone. It exists so the ward can hear — not so anyone can anoint. Every rule below protects that one line.

The two-week runway

Nominations close August 21 — your ward's candidate list is only final after that date. Once you know who's running, this whole kit runs in fourteen days. Invitations need lead time; don't compress this end of the runway.

Day 1 — Book the room. Pick a date, a time, and a space your room already controls — no permission needed from anyone outside it. Check the room seats everyone you expect, is physically accessible or says plainly if it isn't, and has space for a question-card table and an exit harvest table. Decide now whether the night will be recorded (see *Recording*, below) — this decision has to be locked before the invitations go out, because candidates need to know.

Days 1-2 — Invite every candidate, identically. Get the ward's registered-candidate list (from the city's election office once nominations close, or your own working list if you're moving before then — update it the moment the official list lands). Send every candidate the same letter, in writing, the same day. Nobody gets an earlier heads-up, a warmer tone, or a different deadline. Use this template — about ninety words:

Dear [Candidate Name],

You're invited to an all-candidates assembly for Ward [#] — [Ward Name] — on [date], [time], at [Room Name], [address]. Every registered candidate in this ward receives this same invitation, in writing, the same day. Format: openings, questions from ward residents collected in advance and at the door, and closings — equal time, order drawn by lot. No vote is taken and no winner named; the room exists to hear every candidate, not to endorse one. [This event will be recorded. / This event will not be recorded.] Please confirm by [date].

— [Host name], for [Room Name]

A candidate who declines, or never replies, stays on the program exactly as invited — see *Empty chairs*, below. If you send a reminder to any candidate who hasn't replied, send the same reminder, on the same day, to every candidate who hasn't replied — never to some and not others.

Days 3-9 — Collect questions. Put a stack of question cards (template below) somewhere the ward already passes through — the library desk, the school office, the community centre lobby, the back of the hall after service. A simple drop box or a one-page paper form works; a QR code to an online form is a nice-to-have, not a requirement. Keep collecting cards at the door on the night itself — the ward's own top questions should come first, and late questions are still real questions.

Days 7-8 — Confirm chair, panel, timekeeper. Name a chair with no tie to any campaign — a librarian, a teacher, a faith leader, a respected neighbour from outside the ward if nobody inside it is clean of any campaign connection. Name three people, also unaffiliated with any campaign, to read the question cards and pick for breadth — not to pick the sharpest or the trickiest, just the widest spread of what the ward actually asked. If a card names a specific candidate despite the card's own instructions, the panel generalizes it to "the candidates" before it reaches the stage. Name a timekeeper — can be the chair, can be someone else, but never a campaign volunteer.

Days 10-12 — Print and post. Print the rules card, the question cards, the harvest sheets, and signs for the door (room name, date, time, "all candidates invited"). Post the date wherever the room already reaches people — its own bulletin board, its own newsletter, its own group chat. No outside promotion is needed for this to count as real.

Day 13 — Last checks. Confirm headcount for seating and food. Confirm which languages the room should expect and whether a whisper-interpretation corner is needed (see *Translate this kit*, below). Confirm every candidate who replied, and note — plainly, without comment — every one who didn't.

Day 14 — The night. Run the format below.

The night — 90 minutes

Times below assume three candidates; scale the "crowd questions" block up or down for more or fewer — never touch the per-candidate time, which stays identical no matter how many are on stage.

1. **Welcome and rules — 10 min.** The chair reads the equal-terms rules card aloud, in full, before anything else happens.
2. **Openings by lot — 2 min each.** Order was drawn by lot before the room opened (see below); the chair announces the order, then starts the clock.
3. **Crowd questions, equal clocks.** The panel reads questions collected in advance and at the door. Every candidate gets the same clock on every question — the timekeeper enforces it visibly (a card, a bell, a phone timer everyone can see).
4. **Closings by lot — 1 min each.** Same order logic, same visible clock.

5. **Exit harvest.** The chair points to the harvest table on the way out and reads the harvest line (below) — the room’s business ends here; what happens at the table is optional and private to each person filling it out.
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The equal-terms rules card — print this, read it aloud at the open

Tonight’s rules.

- Every candidate on this ward’s ballot was invited in writing, on the same day, on identical terms.
- Tonight’s order was drawn by lot, on this stage, before the room opened.
- Every candidate gets the same time: the same length opening, the same length closing, the same clock on every question.
- This room endorses no one. There is no vote tonight, no applause meter, no “who won.” We are here to hear every candidate — not to decide between them.
- Tonight’s chair, question panel, and timekeeper have no connection to any campaign.
- Every question came from this ward — collected in advance and at the door.
- [This event is being recorded, and everyone on stage knows it. / This event is not being recorded.] If you’d rather your question not be on any recording, you can ask it off-camera — just say so when you hand in your card.

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Empty chairs. Any candidate who declined or never responded is named exactly once, exactly this way: “[Name] — invited, declined” or “[Name] — invited, did not respond.” Nothing more is said about it, on stage or off. No chair is left empty with commentary; no absence is explained, guessed at, or joked about.

Question-card template

Write one question for the candidates.

Please write “the candidates” — not a candidate’s name — since everyone on stage answers the same question.

[space for the question]

Your name is optional and won’t be read aloud.

Harvest sheet — about the ward, not the candidates

The harvest is about your ward, not about anyone on stage tonight. Three lines, on the way out:

- **VISION** — “Toronto in 2030 should ____”
- **COMPLAINT** — What’s broken? (cross-streets optional)
- **NOMINATION** — a neighbourhood superhero: someone in this ward doing more than anyone notices



unitetolove.ca/harvest

If the online form isn't live yet, the paper is the record — nothing is lost.

What travels beyond the room: a headcount and the harvest items, in aggregate only — how many people came, how many vision lines, complaints, and nominations were collected. No names, no attendance list, no record of who said what.

Translate this kit

Translate this kit — a one-page translation is itself a civic act. Priority languages (per the multilingual program, pending census confirmation): Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Spanish, Tamil, Italian, Portuguese, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Farsi, Bengali. Send translations through the same link.

Live whisper-interpretation corners are allowed and encouraged; the host names languages at the door.

A free, open kit. Copy it, change it, translate it, make it yours. — uniteTOlove.ca