# INCLUSION OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES
# IN WISCONSIN PUBLIC MEDIA PROGRAMS

Wisconsin Public Media (WPM) is comprised of PBS Wisconsin and Wisconsin Public Radio. The two services present political coverage and analysis as part of their overall public service and educational mission. During election years, WPM offers programs specifically related to local, state, and national elections. Below is a review of WPM's working policies regarding candidate inclusion in such programming.

Our overarching goal is to help citizens be better informed, so they may choose to be involved in their government and the political process. Given our limited resources — financial, managerial, technical, and available air-time — we have created criteria for evaluating candidates. We are guided by a mix of research (such as polls), professional judgment and legal criteria. It should be noted that there are sometimes competing interests regarding election issues: on the one hand, to provide the broadest possible range of ideas, issues and exposure to candidates; on the other hand, to provide the most useful and meaningful information, which may sometimes require selecting among ideas, issues and candidates. Our purpose is to give service to citizens, not candidates.

WPM is frequently contacted by candidates requesting air-time or inclusion in a debate or other program. There is sometimes a presumption that the non-commercial nature of public television means that any person, by declaring his or her candidacy, should have open access to voters via WPM. This is not the case. The management of WPM has responsibility for programming in political areas, as in all areas, within the policies established by the UW-Board of Regents, the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and the Federal Communications Commission. The United States Supreme Court has held that state television networks may continue to exercise journalistic judgment in relation to political debates.

It should also be noted that in most instances WPM programming is driven by our statewide service. Local issues and races may also be included in WPM news coverage and analysis when they affect a broader community, and as part of our commitment to reflect the diversity of the state. As a general rule, WPM does not present local debates or candidate forums.

During each election cycle, WPM news managers and programming staff will develop specific plans based on the principles contained in this document. We will be consistent in the application of criteria and will specify the criteria being applied *before* a program is publicly announced and before any candidates have been invited to participate.

**Debates**

WPM uses commonly accepted criteria for determining whether or not a candidate is included in a debate. No single criterion is paramount. Collectively, they allow WPM to make an informed judgment about a given candidate's eligibility to participate. Factors include:

- Is the person a legally qualified candidate as specified by the FCC?

- Has the candidate articulated views on principal issues affecting the electorate? (We do not make judgments as to the "importance" of a candidate's ideas, simply that they have expressed their views in a manner accessible to voters, such as written statements.)

- Does the candidate show at least 5% support in independent polls of the electorate?

- Is there an active campaign? Is there a campaign office, a staff, a phone number? In a major race, is there an office outside of the candidate's home?

- Is there funding apart from the candidate's own resources?

- Is there a discernible way of raising money?

- Is there campaign literature? Is there a campaign website?

- Have other news organizations covered the candidate's campaign?

It is also important *when* the debate occurs in a political cycle. For example, early in a campaign, before primaries have been held, there may be a number of active candidates, any one of whom could be a candidate in the general election. At this stage, a debate may well include some or all of these candidates in order to give citizens the *broadest* possible access as they form their views. However, later in the campaign, it may make sense to limit the number of candidates in a debate to those who will realistically determine the outcome of the election. At this later point, the greater service is giving citizens the most *in-depth* information possible.

**News Coverage**

WPM news programs rely on the editorial judgment of our news staff. Coverage of election issues and candidates as part of our news programming (such as *Here and Now* and *Wisconsin Today)* is determined using any, all, or none of the criteria above and complies with all FCC regulations. It is expected that WPM news managers will be able to articulate the reasons and reasoning behind their decisions.

**Reasonable Access For Federal Candidates**

WPM adheres strictly to the federal regulations in this regard. These regulations do not extend to any non-qualified candidates or races.

**Public Service Programs**

This is a genre of programming that is distinct and different from news or debates. Under the FCC definition, public service programs that involve candidates are considered a "Candidate Use" and the broadcaster is prohibited from any editorial or journalistic involvement. Candidates are simply provided with air time under varying guidelines of time and format. In presidential election years WPM will participate in presidential public service programs if they are included in the PBS or NPR schedule, but will not use non-PBS/NPR offers. For some statewide offices and Congressional seats WPM offers public service programs and will develop appropriate criteria. It is unlikely WPM will expand this to include local elections which are best covered locally.

**Program Guidelines**

Wisconsin Public Media follows all FCC rules and guidelines as they pertain to production of election related programming including, but not limited to, candidate inclusion, equal opportunity and editorial involvement. WPM abides by FCC rules relating to the use of indecent language or images by guests appearing in WPM programs.

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