A GUIDE TO PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR CANDIDATE DEBATES

APPEARANCE
• Make eye contact with the audience, the moderator, a panelist asking a question or the camera as appropriate.
• Project comfort, enthusiasm and confidence through your speech and posture.
• Use hand gestures to complement speech, but not as a means to release nervous energy.
• Always conduct yourself as if the cameras and microphones are on and focused on you.
• Do not show anger or frustration over criticisms or difficult questions.
• Avoid bright jewelry or busy clothing; dark, solid colors are best for television.
• Smile and add humor when appropriate.
• Use the opportunity to distinguish yourself from your opponents.
• Make news by presenting new information that reporters or the public did not already have.
• Do not make promises that cannot be delivered; voters want leaders they can trust.

MESSAGE
• Frame each response to not only address the question asked but also promote your core message; everything you say publicly should be linked to your message.
• Always remember your target audience and speak to their interests.
• Focus on the two or three things that you want the audience to remember most.
• Project a vision for the future.

CONTENT
• Ask what topics will be covered in advance and prepare responses ahead of time.
• Use statistics and anecdotes to provide evidence that supports your positions.
• Be positive. A good political leader offers solutions not just criticisms.
• Never repeat criticisms or accusations that have been made against you.
• Use plain language and short sentences with meaning; long, rambling answers put you at risk for criticism and invite questions that you may not want to address.
• Prepare short, memorable quotes that will stand out in the minds of the audience and media long after the debate.

PERFORMANCE
• Visualize yourself performing well.
• Consider a walk or light exercise prior to performance to release nervous energy.
• Avoid potential distractions (pocket change, cell phone, pen, jewelry, etc.); empty your hands.
• Take deep breaths and speak slowly. Vary your tone to emphasize key points.
• Do not inhibit natural body language, but avoid swaying, pacing and making repetitive gestures.
• Avoid words and phrases without meaning (“um,” “like,” “you know”).
• Keep hydrated but avoid foods or drinks that could cause discomfort.

This guide was authored by Josh Hills, media and campaign expert and former NDI debate program advisor.