

A Guide to Hosting Your Own Civil Society Town Hall

Created by the Civil Society Fellowship in Partnership with the Aspen Global Leadership Network and McNulty Foundation



The Civil Society Town Hall initiative offers an anti-dote to our dominant narrative of divisiveness and polarization present in the political lives of folks across the country. The Town Hall invites communities across the country to come together over difference, engage in critical conversations about issues impacting their lives, and model respectful, solutions-oriented civil discourse.

Inspired by the October 29th Town Hall in Washington, DC, this guide provides resources and recommendations for organizing your own gathering, fostering discussions that bridge divides and promote understanding after the election. Our shared goal is to empower you with tools to create a space where diverse perspectives are shared, relationships are strengthened, and impactful dialogue can flourish.

- Creating Event Goals: Make it local!
- Sample Agenda
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- Selecting Topics and Anchor Participants
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Goals

Consider starting your planning by setting clear intentions and goals. It is recommended to think about your goals in the context of your community and what it needs most in this moment. Feel free to use the goals from the 10/29 event as inspiration.

Event Goals

1. Model healthy and respectful civil discourse with individuals across the political spectrum.
2. Combat political polarization by fostering conversations and relationships of trust across difference and modeling a more civil society
3. Engage the Aspen Institute's community including the Civil Society Fellowship and Aspen Global Leadership Network (AGLN) Fellows and their networks in critical dialogue around the US elections

Event Feedback

We would love for you to gather feedback from participants on their experience participating and ask you to share back with us so we can learn together. Should you choose to host a dialogue, we'll share a template for soliciting feedback from your participants. Reach out to our team at agln.info@aspeninstitute.org for the sample feedback form and/or for help creating your own reflective of your town hall's goals.

Hosting Notes

Seating Arrangement and Room Set Up:

We strongly recommend you consider the seating arrangements when selecting a venue. [A fishbowl setup](#), or an Aspen Institute seminar-style hollow circle can create more intimacy and better facilitate moderated conversation (vs theater seating). This setup can help with cohesion and trust, and disincentivize grandstanding during the discussion period. It will also benefit your MCs and/or Moderators who have a better vantage point for engaging the entire audience.

Be sure everyone in the audience can be easily heard. Consider having an audio setup with a wireless microphone if the size of the room/audience reaches beyond a 20-25 person group. Consider the needs of the moderators/hosts to hear and be heard by everyone in attendance. Also consider not everyone attending may be comfortable or accustomed to addressing a large group.

Consider having water or coffee (depending on the time of day) available throughout the dialogue and/or a light reception with snacks and drinks afterward so folks can continue to connect informally.

Venues:

Consider hosting in public spaces like public libraries, community centers or local schools as they may have suitable spaces and are accessible.

Timing:

Consider planning your event for after the Presidential inauguration (January 20th, 2025), it may be easier for participants to dialogue and dream with news of the Presidential election behind us.

RSVPs:

It's important to understand who is attending so you can prepare yourself and your guests for the conversation. Consider how you want to collect RSVPs and/or contact information. This could be a simple RSVP form like [Google Forms](#), a free digital invitation service like [Paperless Post](#), or a direct message or email to you as the host. Keep in mind it is likely some folks who RSVP yes may need to cancel last minute - take this into account when deciding the number of invitations to send.

Sample Agenda

Below is a sample agenda based on the 10/29 launch event, which ran 90 minutes. Please modify to fit your needs.

- Host: "The program is about to begin, take your seats and we'll start with a brief video."
- Intro Video - 3.5 minutes [feel free to use the intro video from the 10/29 Town Hall [linked here](#)]
- Host Welcome Remarks / Setting the Scene / Introduce Moderators - 5 minutes
- Moderator Introductions - 4 mins
- Town Hall Dialogue
 - Issue #1: Economy & Health - 18 mins
 - Issue #2: Immigration - 16 mins
 - Issue #3 Criminal Legal System - 16 mins

- Q&A Dialogue and Meaning Making Around a Healthy Democracy - 18 minutes

What is our responsibility as citizens and leaders in our community to build bridges across difference? How do we rebuild trust in our communities? What's your individual obligation to upholding faith in an American Dream?

- Closing Remarks from Host - 5 mins

Select Anchors and Topics

The most important thing you can do to set your event up for success is thoughtfully choosing the topics you'll cover and the leaders who will anchor each discussion. Getting the pairing right between topic and anchor participants is key.

About “anchor” participants:

- Anchor participants are folks attending the gathering who can help “anchor” the dialogue - with their lived experience and/or expertise around your selected topics
- They are the person(s) who the moderator/host can go to first to answer questions
- A fantastic anchor participant can bring a topic to life, even if the rest of your guests don't have much direct experience with an issue.

Consider the dynamic between anchor participants:

- Consider choosing anchor participants that already know each other
- Suggest a call between them before the event to build a foundation of respect and relationship.
- It can be helpful if your anchor participants have some common ground on the issue. But not too much! The goal is, in part, to model agreeable disagreement. They have to disagree!

Choose topics that feel relevant and specific to your community:

- These can be issues of national importance or something specific to your community.
- If a topic speaks to the lived experience of your participants, it may provide a rich conversation regardless of who anchors it.

Don't shy away from divisive topics:

- Make sure you have anchor participants who can model for the audience how to discuss the topic in a respectful and productive way.
- The more activating the topic, the higher the challenge for the anchor participants.

Participants: Selection and Expectations Setting

Be thoughtful about who you invite as participants, particularly if you plan to have a robust Q&A or a group discussion. Passionate people with a personal connection to the issues you want to discuss will ensure the conversation is meaningful. It's also important that participants be genuinely committed to a respectful discussion with someone they strongly disagree with.

You can help set participants up for success by setting expectations in advance of the event and setting the stage well at the beginning of the event. Be clear in advance about the goals of your event, and make explicit that participants can expect to hear from people with opposing views.

Like Aspen Institute seminar rooms, gatherings like this are high challenge spaces. We recommend sharing the considerations on the next page ahead of your gathering as they may help prepare your guests to have a more productive experience.

Questions?

Email agln.info@aspeninstitute.org to get in touch with our team.

Considerations for Participants

The Basics:

Food, water, sleep. Take care of yourself!. Hungry, angry, tired people don't make great partners for productive disagreement.

Disagreeing:

If you strongly disagree with what someone is saying, or are having a negative reaction, try and take a moment to be curious. What is the emotional experience underneath what they are saying? Can you imagine what it might feel like to be them? Does that change how you hear what they are saying?

As a response, could you begin by saying how something is making you feel, before (or instead of) making your point? Pivoting to seek emotional common ground, or empathetic connection, can unlock new possibilities in intellectual discussion.

Needing Certain Response:

Notice if you are finding yourself fixating on getting others to react in the way you want them to. Are you trying to get them to concede a point? Is there a way you could express your reason for wanting this in personal, vulnerable terms?

Community During Conflict:

When we are hurting, or angry, it's normal to want, to need, to see a similar reaction from our community. Sometimes our community doesn't react the way we want them to or the way we think they should. They may say things we find offensive. They may think things we don't understand or don't believe are correct. They may have beliefs that we find unconscionable. This is excruciating and heartbreaking. It may change our relationship with them forever.

In moments like this, useful questions can be:

- Is this worth trying to resolve today?
- Might be best left until tomorrow?
- Right now, what of this relationship can I protect, salvage, honor, hold on to, through this pain?