

## Becoming Active in an Election

Elections are a strategic time to advance political issues. This section provides political action strategies specific to elections. It offers strategies on how to communicate a nursing perspective on health-related issues to candidates. It also describes different forums you can organize or use to disseminate your views and ideas.

## Becoming Active in an Election

Election campaigns provide a critical opportunity for registered nurses, nurse practitioners and nursing students to influence the parties' policy positions. Because nurses are highly trusted by the public, nurses' positions on key issues carry a great deal of credibility and influence during elections. The earlier you become involved, the more influence you can exert.

Influencing public policy means acting individually and collectively in a show of strength. Working together with your colleagues, Chapter, Region or Interest Group during an election campaign is a great way to show that strength.

We have prepared this section to assist you and your colleagues in becoming actively involved in these campaigns. You have a right and a duty, both as a citizen and as a nurse, to be involved in the democratic process. And, finally, you are not alone. There are more than 107, 000 registered nurses and nurse practitioners in Ontario. Let's use our power.

### Get actively involved with RNAO

One of the benefits of advocating through RNAO is the strength of collective action through a professional association. RNAO provides a strong infrastructure and resources to help you be effective with your political advocacy strategies (Kaplan, 2013). Contact the policy department for guidance and support for getting involved in elections. For example, RNAO plans events like Queen's Park Day and Queen's Park on the Road to engage members in political action.

#### How to get your colleagues, Chapter, Region, or Interest Group involved:

- Call a meeting for those interested in getting involved. (Even two people is a good start.)
- Identify which RNAO priority issues are most relevant to your local context.
- Determine which activities you are comfortable taking on/have the resources for.

### Platforms

During provincial and federal elections, you can visit RNAO's website for a comparison of the parties' political platforms.

RNAO's platform comparison will provide you with information on where parties stand on issues related to nursing, Medicare, healthy public policy, and environmental and the social determinants of health. Knowing where the parties stand on platform issues will help you formulate more specific questions for your local candidate. It will also help you and those close to you to make an informed decision on Election Day.

During the lead-up to Election Day, you may unexpectedly meet a political candidate – while working or in the community. One way to prepare for these unplanned encounters is to prepare a 60 second speech in advance.

#### 60 Second Speech

1. Share your name and who you are representing.
2. Describe your issue.
3. Tell a story that humanizes your request.
4. Describe your solution.
5. Share your contact information or a fact sheet.

(Tomajan, 2012)

Keep in mind who you are representing and ensure it is clear to the person you are communicating with. Are you sharing your personal views, those of your organization, or RNAO's? Take these opportunities to ask questions. The more often you do it, the easier it gets.

The following are strategies that you may wish to use before and after elections. Please share with RNAO's Nursing and Health Policy department the strategies you used and the impact they had. You can use the staff directory on myRNAO to find the appropriate contact person or complete the Contact Us form on the RNAO website: <http://RNAO.ca/contact>

#### Election-Time Approaches to Candidates

1. Distribute questions for individuals to ask when candidates knock on their door.
2. Invite candidates to a panel discussion or forum on health-related issues at an RNAO Chapter or Interest Group meeting.
3. Send Chapter or Interest Group members an invitation to attend and ask questions at community all-candidates meetings. Refer to the section on all-candidates meetings for ideas.
4. Organize your own all-candidates meeting on health issues.
5. Call the candidates in your riding and ask to meet them in their campaign office so that you can discuss their platforms and your concerns in person (this can also be done in a small group).

## Meeting or interviewing a candidate

This section contains some helpful hints for meeting with candidates. Once you have planned your first meeting, the others will be much easier to organize.

### Why meet with a candidate?

Building a relationship with politicians is extremely important. It also lets candidates know what issues are important to you as a RN, and can influence their position and priorities. Finally, meetings with candidates are the best way to get direct answers to your questions. Not only do these relationships give you access to timely information it also positions you as a trusted source of information. When that politician needs information about nursing or health issues, they will come to you to get it (Kaplan, 2013).

While meeting with a candidate in person has many advantages, it can also be time-consuming. Examine your schedule and decide how many meetings you can realistically prepare for. Interviewing candidates from all parties would be ideal – but speaking with even one can make a difference. Speaking to all parties could bolster more support for your issue especially if there is a minority government.

### How should I go about setting up a meeting or interview?

- ✓ Within your Chapter, Region or Interest Group, establish a subcommittee to conduct the interviews and related activities.
- ✓ Ask candidates if they are willing to participate.
- ✓ Identify your key issues and prepare a set of questions to ask during the interviews. RNAO's Policy department can help you with this.
- ✓ Hold role-playing sessions for team members to practice before the meeting.
- ✓ Tell candidates in advance how you plan to use their responses (i.e. if you are keeping track of, or posting and circulating their responses).
- ✓ If you wish to record the interview, inform the candidate and obtain his/her consent.
- ✓ Agree on a mutually acceptable time to conduct the interview.
- ✓ Decide how you will distribute the information you have collected.
- ✓ After the meeting, send a hand written thank-you note to each participant.
- ✓ Distribute your information! Send an email to your network, individuals, or groups that may be interested.

### Helpful hints:

At first, try not to let your own opinions or political views be known or the candidates may just tell you what you want to hear. However, it is a good idea to leave the candidate with a clear understanding of where you – and RNAO - stand on the issues. After the meeting, watch for signs that your key messages have been incorporated into her/his speeches or platform. If so,

call, email, or write a letter to the candidate to let him/her know that you are very pleased. If not, send a written note restating your point.

### All-candidates meetings

An all-candidates meeting is another way to work with key decision-makers on issues that are important to registered nurses, nurse practitioners and nursing students. It is a great way to assess competing candidates - while they are in the same room! It also provides an opportunity for many people to get the input they need to make an informed choice on Election Day. Finally, it is an ideal way to increase RNAO's and nurses' public profile.

### There are two ways to approach all-candidates meetings:

1. Organize your own all-candidates meeting with other individuals and members of your Chapter, Region or Interest Group, or;
2. Attend meetings held by other community partners.

### Organizing an all-candidates meeting

- Get together
- Gather a group of individuals to form a planning committee, and decide on the specific issues you want addressed.
- Choose the format for the meeting: panel or debate
  - Panel: Form a panel that will pose questions to the candidates. Ideally, choose a moderator who is well-known locally. This will draw a larger audience, and help attract media coverage. Allow time for questions from the audience.
  - Debate: Select the issues for discussion and choose a moderator. Again, it is ideal to choose a non-partisan moderator who is well-known locally. This will draw a larger audience, and help attract media coverage. Allocate a set amount of time for each candidate to express her/his views, as well as time for questions from the audience.
- Negotiate the details
- Coordinate a convenient date and time with the candidates and other participants.
- Choose a neutral location with nearby parking.
- Arrange for audio-visual needs, podium, risers, chairs, etc.
- Spread the word
- Advertise your meeting in the local newspaper, community calendars, and through public service announcements on radio and TV.
- Take advantage of free local weekly newspapers which have wide circulation.
- Call the media outlets in your community to let them know about the meeting. RNAO's Communications department will be happy to help you with this.
- If your budget allows, print and post flyers in supermarkets, laundromats, libraries, and other high traffic public locations.

### Preparing for the meeting

- Have water available for each of the candidates and the moderator.
- Designate a timekeeper to sit where the speaker can see her/him. To help candidates stay within the agreed time limit, have one piece of paper that says “3 minutes left” and another that says “1 minute left”, and show them to the speaker at the appropriate intervals.
- Have materials on hand for the public to take home. You may consider contacting RNAO’s Nursing and Health Policy or Communications Department for advice on which documents to make available.

### At the meeting

- Arrive 15 minutes early to get a seat close to the floor microphone. Long line-ups can materialize very quickly.
- Take a deep breath. Speaking to candidates in front of an audience can be stressful, especially if it is your first time doing so. Remember – other people in the audience will likely have the same questions you do, but may be too shy to ask. Not only will you receive an answer, but others will as well.
- When it’s your turn to speak, introduce yourself as a registered nurse, nurse practitioner or nursing student. Speak slowly and clearly, and make eye contact with the candidates. Don’t be afraid to try for a follow-up question.

### After the meeting

- Send a written thank-you note to the candidates, moderator, and venue (if appropriate).
- Email your network, Chapter, Region, or Interest Group about the event, and copy RNAO.
- If the media was not present at your event, you may follow up with local media to see if you could submit a short media release about the meeting for publication.
- Attending a community all-candidates meeting
- Get together
- Gather a group of individuals from your riding who are interested in and comfortable with posing questions to candidates in front of a community audience.
- Form a plan
- Look through your local newspaper or community newsletter for information on all-candidates meetings in your area.
- Draw up a schedule of all the meetings that will be held in your riding.
- Have each member of your team attend one of the meetings. If there are not enough members to cover all meetings, arrange a rotating schedule.
- If possible, have members attend in pairs for support.
- Brainstorm a list of questions to ask candidates. We have included some sample questions on the following page to help you with this. Try to ask a different question at each meeting.

### Examples of Questions

Almost every day I come to work, we are short staffed. That means that patients have to wait for us to get to them - they might end up sitting in a soiled bed, or if they are tired of waiting, they might get up on their own and fall. Because we don't have enough staff, sometimes our patients get neglected. When we can't give the best care, it is frustrating. Some of us are burnt out and as you know, burn out is one of the risk factors for abuse and neglect. **If your party is elected, what will it do to increase the number of registered nurses and other health-care providers?**

We are learning about what we can do to prevent elder abuse, but we can't do it alone. **What do you think is the government's role in the prevention of abuse and neglect of older adults?**

### Post-election approaches to politicians

Send a congratulatory letter to the politician elected in your riding and reintroduce yourself as a registered nurse, nurse practitioner and nursing student and a member of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO). In your letter, offer to serve as a resource for consultation and/or information on nursing and health-care issues.

Ask to meet with the politician within the first few weeks after the election to discuss local health issues. This will help you establish rapport and increase your influence. Again, offer to assist by serving as a resource for consultation and/or information. Remember, politicians need to be informed in order to successfully represent their constituencies – by helping them succeed, you will make yourself indispensable.

Invite them to relevant events and meetings to participate in a question and answer session or panel discussion. Send a written thank-you note after the event, and follow up with an email to individuals, your network or chapter or interest group members. You may also consider writing a report in a newsletter. Advise politicians that you intend to publish their remarks.

Keep them informed about events and initiatives that you, your Chapter, Region, or Interest Group have organized. This is a way of keeping in touch and ensuring that she/he remains aware of health-care and nursing issues and RNAO's positions on these issues.

## References - Becoming Active in an Election

Kaplan, L. (2013). *Making a difference thorough grassroots legislative action*. *The Nurse Practitioner*, 38(9), 8-9.

Tomajan, K. (2012). *Advocating for Nurses and Nursing*. *Advocating for Nurses and Nursing*. *The Online Journal of Issues of Nursing*, 17(1), Manuscript 4.





*So never lose an opportunity of urging a practical beginning, however small, for it is wonderful how often in such matters the mustard-seed germinates and roots itself.*

(Florence Nightingale)