

Making that Decision

How to Judge a Candidate

Elections present voters with important choices. Whether it is a local race that will affect your community or a national race that could change the direction of the country, it is a time to consider the issues that you care about and to decide which candidates you support. Elections campaigns offer an excellent way to learn about the people and issues that affect your and your children's lives and futures.

How do voters go about comparing and then judging the candidates? All too often, slogans, name-recognition and personality are all that come through in campaign literature. As television has come to dominate political campaigns, it has become more and more difficult to get beyond a candidate's image to the substance of the campaign.

But – it is possible to go beyond style to substance.

First, **decide what you are looking for in a candidate.**

Candidates can be judged by the positions they take on issues, as well as the leadership qualities and experience they would bring to the office. So, your first step is to decide the issues you care about and the qualities you want in a leader.

This year, when you consider the issues, think about the community problems that you want the people in your local government to address. For example, are your roads repaired when needed? Is snow removal adequate on your street? Are there enough stop signs to prevent dangerous accidents?

(If there are any local issues of concern in your community, you can add them here.)

These are all local issues.

When you consider leadership qualities, think about the characteristics you want in an effective leader. Do you look for intelligence, honesty, ability to communicate effectively? What else?

Next, **find out about the candidates.**

You can find out which candidates are running in a particular race by calling your local board of elections, political party headquarters, or the League of Women Voters. You can also go to their websites to get the information, or read about the candidates in your local newspaper or the

League's Voters' Guide. Find out all of the candidates who are eligible to appear on the ballot, not just those who are running on the major parties.

Then, **gather material about the candidates, and evaluate their stands on the issues.**

Collect any information you can find about the candidates. Call their campaign headquarters, watch for information in the newspapers, check their websites. You will have access to campaign literature, direct mail letters, newspaper articles, television and radio ads and reports, candidates' speeches and candidates' forums and debates. For incumbents (those presently in the job) you can check their voting records on issues that you consider important.

Learn about the candidates' leadership abilities.

Deciding if a candidate will be a good leader is difficult. How can you know if someone will be honest, able to act appropriately when under pressure, able to work well with other officials to get things accomplished?

- Look at the candidates' backgrounds and their experience. How well prepared are they for the job?
- Observe the candidates' campaigns. Do they accept speaking engagements before different groups - even those that might not be sympathetic? Do they accept invitations to debate? Or, do their campaigns emphasize media events – where the candidates can be seen but not heard, where they can avoid serious questions. (For example, a candidate is seen cutting a ribbon to open a new store in the neighborhood, instead of talking about how more companies can be encouraged to come to the area.)
- Review campaign materials. As you read and watch campaigns develop, write down information that gives you insight into the candidates' personalities and leadership qualities. (For example, does a candidate's campaign literature emphasize issues or just image?)

Learn what other people think about the candidates.

- Find out what others in your community know about the candidates.

These people can be store owners, neighbors, political volunteers, family members. Ask them who they support and why. Learn what shaped their opinions about the candidates. Was it something that happened? Was it something that one of the candidates said? Is there a particular issue that is very important to them? Do they feel especially strongly about a particular political party?

- Learn about endorsements.

This is how some interest groups and organizations give their “stamp of approval” to particular candidates. Endorsements provide clues as to the issues a candidate supports. For example, a candidate endorsed by the Sierra Club, which is an environmental organization, will be in favor of legislation that protects the environment. A candidate endorsed by the National Rifle Association would be opposed to gun control laws. You can get a list of endorsements from each of the candidates’ headquarters, or sometimes, from their websites. Find out what these groups stand for, and why they endorse this candidate.

- Look into campaign contributions.

Where are the candidates getting the money to fund their campaigns? Do they use their own money? Do they get money from a few wealthy donors? Do they get money from many small contributors or from Political Action Committees (which are formed specifically to raise and distribute money to candidates)? A lot of information about campaign contributions must be reported to the government. This information is sometimes available on the internet and in newspaper articles. Check the newspapers for information on campaign financing. How might some of these contributions affect the candidates’ conduct if elected? What is the incumbent’s voting record on issues important to PACs and other campaign contributors?

- Follow opinion polls that are reported on television or in the newspapers.

Find out who sponsored the poll (when parties and candidates pay for polls, they may not publish unfavorable information) and what kind of questions were asked. Were the questions slanted or unbiased? How many people were included in the sample? Were they chosen randomly or in such a way as to include all segments of the population? Polls reveal who is leading at a certain point of time, and can increase contributions from people who want to be on the winning side.

See through distortion techniques.

All candidates are trying to sell themselves to the voters. Sometimes, they are so skillful, they distort the truth in ways that are difficult for even the most careful observer to detect. There are a number of things to watch for as you review campaign literature.

- Name calling and appeals to prejudice

These are attacks on an opponent based on characteristics that will not affect performance in office. For example: “My opponent is arrogant and full of hot air.” (This does not give any real information about the candidate. References to race or marital status can also be used to instill prejudice.)

- Rumor Mongering

This includes such statements as: “Everyone says my opponent is a crook, but I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing.” (This type of statement implies that the person might be guilty.)

- Catchwords

These are phrases such as “law and order” or “un-American” that are meant to trigger an emotional reaction, not to inform.

- Passing the blame

These are instances in which a candidate denies responsibility for an action or blames an opponent for things over which he/she had no control.

- Promising the impossible

Some candidates make promises that no elected official could fulfill.

- Evading real issues

Candidates may avoid answering direct questions, offer only vague solutions, or talk about the benefits of proposed programs but never get specific about possible problems or costs.

Sort it all out.

Review your information, and compare the candidates.

- Which candidates’ views on the issues do you agree with most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidates showed the most knowledge on the issues?
- Which candidates have the leadership qualities you are looking for?

Is the choice clear? If so, your choice is also.

Be sure to cast an informed vote on November 8th.

How to Pick a Candidate

A major political campaign, with all its activity and extensive news coverage can bombard us with images and impressions, yet leave us with very little real information about the candidates and their stands on issues. We have to sort out what we need to know in order to pick a candidate when we get to the polls.

Slogans, name recognition and **personality** are often all that come through in campaign material:

30 to 90 second pre-packaged messages

"photo-ops", on news shows

political flyers

mass mailings

Slogans, such as: *the new frontier, or the great society*

have been used for a very long time by the candidates to project a certain image or to create a particular political climate, but with the fast pace of our lives and our increasing dependence on mass media, political campaigns today are often mostly **image** campaigns. When images dominate the political scene, probing for issues takes hard work. But, the reward makes it worthwhile.

What techniques can we use to see through the images?

1. *Take a close look at campaign information*

Television and radio commercials – When you see or hear a paid political ad, ask yourself some questions:

What did you learn about the candidate from the ad?

Did you find out anything about issues or qualifications?

Was the ad designed only to affect feelings or attitudes about the candidate?

How important was the music, the setting, the script?

Was the ad designed to appeal to women, minorities, older voters, single-issue groups?

You **can** learn about the issues, even from a 60-second TV commercial, **if** the candidate wants you to, **or** if you can separate the glitter from the substance.

Direct mail – More and more candidates are using direct mail to solicit funds and/or votes.

Computerization has made it easy to personalize appeals to selected groups of voters. Candidates can send members of women's groups one message, members of veterans' groups another message, and members of senior citizen groups still another message. **However**, if you are aware that you must **read between the lines** to get the full story, the direct mail letter can help you to understand the candidate's stands on the issues. Recognize that the letter is a campaign tactic and try to see what you can learn from it.

Pamphlets and flyers – The leaflet left at your door or handed to you at the railroad station or at the mall may contain substantive information, or it may be full of **lies, distortions** or **evasions**. You have to read it critically. *Does it tell you more about the candidate's devotion to family than about qualifications for office or stands on issues?* Be on the lookout for accusations or other statements about opponents, especially if made so close to Election Day that such statements cannot be answered or denied.

Emotional Appeals – Listen carefully to a candidate's appeals and arguments. Then decide if they are targeted for your emotions alone. *Is the candidate trying to make you mad enough to accept certain arguments without question?* Maybe war injuries or a poverty-stricken childhood should get your sympathy, but they shouldn't get your vote. Look for the facts. Learn to spot manipulative techniques.

Recognize Distortion Tactics

Name-calling – In a classic case, quite a long time ago, a politician won an election when he said that his opponent *once matriculated* and that his wife was a *thespian*. (1940s in FL)

Aside from the ignorant and the absurd, **inflammatory statements** that distort the truth can be just as damaging. An opponent can be called *wishy-washy* or *two-faced*, when his or her behavior might be better described as *flexible* or *responsive*. We should not be sidetracked either by attacks on a candidate based on family, ethnicity, gender, race or personal characteristics that do not make a difference in ability or performance.

Rumor-mongering – Watch for the unsubstantiated statement or innuendo:

Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge or any wrongdoing. I can't speak for my opponent, but I never would have awarded such a low-cost loan to an out-of-state builder.

These types of statements may be legal, but it is dirty campaigning. Such “dark hints” can sway an election if voters are not wary, long before a fair-campaign investigation or a slander lawsuit can put a stop to them.

Loaded statements – “*I oppose wasteful spending*” doesn't say much, and it implies that the candidate's opponent favors it. If a candidate gets away with claims like this, he or she may never be held to account for identifying which expenses are necessary and which are not. The loaded question has the same effect. Asking, “*Where was my opponent when the chips were down about expanding unemployment insurance?*” without mentioning that the bill never came to the floor for a vote is an easy way to distort the facts.

Guilt by Association – Look carefully at criticism of a candidate based on that candidate’s supporters –

We all know Smith is backed by big money interests.

The union has Jones in its pocket.

Every candidate needs support from a wide range of people and groups. They may not necessarily represent the candidate’s views on all the issues. Judge the candidate’s own words and deed.

Catchwords – Beware of empty phrases such as “*law and order*” or “*the American way*”

They are often designed to trigger an emotional reaction without saying much. If a term can’t be easily defined, be on your guard. What is the candidate really trying to say?

Baiting – Politics is a tough game, but badgering and intimidation are unfair campaign tactics.

Think twice about a candidate who tries to make an opponent look weak or out of control by harassment until he or she flies off the handle or says something rash.

Spot phony issues

Passing the blame – When one candidate or party accuses another candidate or party of being the cause of a major problem, such as *unemployment* or *inflation*, check it out. The incumbent, or the party in power, is often accused of causing all the world’s problems. *Was the candidate really in a position to solve the problem? What other factors were at work? Did the candidate have enough time to tackle the problem?*

Promising the moon and the stars – There are promises that no one in elective office can fulfill, and problems that cannot be solved by political solutions. Public officials can accomplish realistic goals, but voters shouldn’t expect miracles, and candidates shouldn’t promise them. When you hear lots and lots of promises, consider how realistic they really are.

Evading hard issues – Many candidates work very hard to avoid giving direct answers to direct questions. For example, it's not enough to say, "*I've always been concerned about the high cost of health care,*" and leave it at that. Also, the candidate who claims to have a secret, easy plan to solve a tough problem is often just copping out of giving an answer. Watch out for candidates who talk about benefits and never mention the costs, or how the program will actually work.

How can we check out the sources of information?

1. Watch the *polls* carefully. Don't support a candidate just because the polls say that a majority in your age group, ethnic group or party does. Before you believe everything you read in a poll, ask these questions:

Who sponsored the poll? – *Did they release all of the figures?* When parties pay for polls, they may not publish unfavorable data.

Was the poll affected by a key event? – Public opinion can change drastically due to a highly publicized event, such as a military crisis or a political scandal.

What questions were asked? – *Were the questions slanted?* You can easily spot blatantly biased questions that couldn't help but produce a resounding *yes* or *no*, but what about ones that subtly steer a respondent to a certain answer, or leave no room for a *yes, if...* or a *no, but...*

Who was interviewed? – *How were respondents selected? Were they selected randomly, or in such a way as to include all segments of the population proportionately?* If they weren't, the results may tell you how a small group feels, but nothing about the total population.

How many were interviewed? – No matter how well a poll is done, there is always a margin of error, and the smaller the sample, the wider the margin or error.

How many undecideds were there? – *Were the questions clear? Did they reflect real choices? Were the questions asked too far before the actual election?* Remember, once the undecideds make up their minds, the results can change drastically.

How long ago was the poll taken? – Even the best polls are just a snapshot in time. People may change their minds in a day, a week or a month, especially in the charged atmosphere of a political campaign. Look for polls that compare current figures and past ones, and try to spot the trends.

Use group ratings shrewdly. Some organizations representing special interest groups (businesses, the environment, labor, senior citizens, etc.) sift through votes on crucial bills and rate them on how closely they match their particular groups goals or point of view.

These ratings can help us as voters, but they can also be very misleading. We should use them wisely, as a way to gauge the incumbents' positions, but never take them as the final word.

Check the reputation of the organization – *Does it have a record of accurate analysis and reporting? Is it supported by those it claims to represent?*

What is the groups' bias? – *Which issues are important to its members? Are they the same ones you care about?* What one group might label as a vote for wasteful spending, another might see as a vote in support of a vital social remedy. Conflicting goals and perceptions lead to conflicting ratings.

What votes were included in the rating scale? – For example, sometimes the vote in question is on an amendment, not on the main bill. Do the group's choices and explanations help you to sort it out?

Rate the candidates:

1. ***On how they campaign*** – The way a candidate runs a campaign can provide important clues as to how that candidate would perform as a public official, once elected. A candidate who runs an *open, straightforward, issue oriented campaign* can be expected to become an accessible, forthright and thoughtful public official. So evaluate the contenders on their campaign performance.

Accessibility – *Is the candidate willing to debate with opponents? Does the candidate meet regularly with the press? Does the candidate accept speaking engagements before different groups, even those that might not be sympathetic? Does the candidate appear in person, or avoid public scrutiny by sending stand-ins?*

Information – *Do the candidate's campaign ads provide clear information on issue positions? Can you easily obtain position papers or answers to your questions? Are the candidate's qualifications clearly stated, and are they the ones that will be important in public office? Is the candidate's voting record easily available?*

Openness – Seeing a candidate shaking hands at the train station or at a huge political rally won't tell you much about his or her abilities or positions. Most of us must rely on the candidate's use of the media to find out more. *What should we watch for?*

- a. ***In a broadcast interview:*** Who is the interviewer? Is it an ally, asking only friendly, carefully phrased questions? Is it an antagonist, out to make the candidate look bad, rather than shed light for the voter? Is the candidate being hounded or asked questions that you feel are pointless? Or, is the interviewer a

regular station or network staff person, with no special ax to grind? Does the interviewer follow up, if answers are evasive or off the point?

b. In a question and answer session: *What about the audience? Where did they come from? Who selected them – the candidate’s party or staff? The broadcaster’s? A disinterested party?* If you’re not sure, call the station or campaign headquarters and find out.

c. *Where does a candidate appear? Does the campaign emphasize media events, where the candidate can be seen and not heard, like a parade or a country fair?* Talking only on narrow, sure-fire topics to safe audiences is a cop-out. Voters deserve a broader perspective.

2. ***On the big issues*** – *Pinpoint the issues that are important to you. Decide what changes you feel are needed in your community, state, country. What do you want to remain the same? Which of your interests would be served by the programs each candidate is proposing? As you think about it, weigh the various alternatives. Listen to people on both sides of an issue. Look at cause and effect. Consider what you have to trade off to get what you want.*

Finally – be sure to vote on November 8th.