

III. 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 Election Day.