

II. Making the Decision – Who to Vote For

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 international problems that you expect the people in our national government to address. How should our nation proceed in Iraq? How can we reach an acceptable balance between the need for national security and for civil rights. What can be done to improve Medicare part D? These are all important national issues.

And – what about state issues?

Is reform needed regarding public employee pension plans? What can be done to end gerrymandering in NYS? What can be done to reduce loophole borrowing by public authorities?

(Choose issues of greatest importance in your community.)

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 Election Day.