

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 which you care about and decide which candidate you support. Even if you are under 18 and not yet eligible to vote, election campaigns offer an excellent way to learn about the people and issues that affect your future.

But 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 materials. Because television continues to dominate political campaigns, with the Internet as an every growing presence, it is difficult to move beyond a candidate's image to the substance of a campaign.

However, it is possible to move beyond style to substance. The seven steps outlined in this brochure are designed to help you judge a candidate

STEP 1

Decide what you are looking for in a candidate.

Candidates can be judged in two ways: the positions they take on issues and the leadership qualities and experience they would bring to the office. Your first step in picking a candidate is to decide the issues *you* care about and the qualities *you* want in a leader.

When you consider issues, think about community or national problems that you want people in government to address. Also consider what party the candidate belongs to and the typical stance the party takes on the issues. For example, you may be interested in national security, government funding for student loans or unemployment.

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

After considering which issues and qualities are most important to *you* in this campaign, record them on the *Candidate Report Card* on page 4.

STEP 2

Find out about the candidates.

Pick a campaign(s) to study. It can be any type of race: a national office (such as president, senator, or representative), a state race (such as governor), or a local race (such as city council member or school board member). It will probably be easier to follow a visible race that is hotly contested or that involves a major office.

First, find out which candidates are running in the race you are following by using the League's online election resource VOTE411.org (www.VOTE411.org). You can find the number for your local elections office and data on the candidates. A Voters' Guide, published by your local League of Women Voters, is another source of information. Find out all the eligible candidates that will appear on the ballot. Be sure to include minor party and/or independent candidates.

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STEP 3

Gather materials about the candidates.

Put together information about the candidates. Collect any records you can find on the candidates. Call campaign headquarters and watch the press. Sources of information you may choose to review include:

- www.VOTE411.org
- campaign literature
- direct mail letters (mass mailings sent to selected voters asking for support and funds)
- press reports (newspaper clippings and television and radio reports)
- radio and television ads (call campaign headquarters and find out when ads are aired, or ask if you can view them at headquarters)
- candidates' speeches
- candidate debates

In a local race, interviews with the candidates can be helpful. For incumbents, a look at their voting records on issues that you have listed as important can tell you the candidates' positions on those issues.

STEP 4

Evaluate candidates' stands on issues.

As you read the materials you collect, keep a journal. Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about the candidates' stands on issues? Record what you have learned about their stands on your priority issues from each source. Fill in the *Candidate Report Card* as you gather new information about the candidates.

STEP 5

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, open or able to act under pressure if elected to office? Here are some ways to read between the lines as you evaluate the candidates' leadership qualities:

1. Look at the candidates' background and their experience. How prepared are they for the job?
2. Observe the candidates' campaigns. Do they give speeches to different groups – even those groups that may disagree with the candidates' views on issues? Do they accept invitations to debate? Do the campaigns emphasize media events, where the candidates can be seen but not heard? (For instance, a candidate is seen cutting ribbons to open new bridges rather than talking about transportation.)
3. Review the campaign materials. As you read the materials and watch the campaign develop, add to your journal information that provides insights into candidates' personalities and leadership qualities. For example, do campaign materials emphasize issues or image? Are they accurate? Add this information to the *Candidate Report Card*.

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STEP 6

Learn how other people view the candidate.

Now that you have accumulated information from campaigns and other sources, you will want to learn what other people think about the candidates. Their opinions can help clarify your own views, but do not discount your own informed judgments. You may be the most careful observer of all!

1. Seek the opinions of others in your community who keep track of political campaigns. Interview three people (not family members), such as a librarian, store owner, neighbor or politically active volunteer, to find out which candidate they support and why. Learn what has shaped their political opinions. Was it an event? An idea or program proposed by a candidate? A particular issue about which they feel strongly? A long-standing party loyalty?
2. Learn about endorsements. This is a way for interest groups and organizations to give a “stamp of approval” to a candidate. Endorsements provide clues to the issues a candidate supports. For instance, a candidate endorsed by the Sierra Club (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. Get a list of endorsements from each of the candidates’ headquarters. Find out what these groups stand for and find out why they are endorsing this candidate.
3. Look into campaign contributions. Where do the candidates get the funds to finance their campaigns? Do they use their own money or raise funds from a few wealthy donors, from many small contributors or from Political Action Committees? (PACs, as they are known, are groups formed to raise and distribute money to candidates.) Many types

of information about campaign contributions must be reported to the government and are watched by the press. Check the newspaper for stories on campaign finance or go online to www.opensecrets.org. How might these campaign contributions affect the candidates’ conduct in office? You might also want to analyze an incumbent’s voting record on issues important to PACs and other campaign contributors.

4. Throughout the campaign, opinion polls will be taken by a variety of groups to evaluate public support for the different candidates. Polls reveal who is leading at a certain point in the race. This information can be crucial for a candidate because it can increase support and contributions from people who want to be on the winning team. As you read the polls, ask these questions: Who sponsored the poll? Was the poll produced by a trusted and independent group? Were all the figures released, even unfavorable data? What kinds of questions were asked? Were they slanted or unbiased? How were respondents selected – randomly or in such a way to include all segments of the population? How many people were included in the poll sample?

STEP 7

Sorting it all out.

Review the information in your *Candidate Report Card* and compare all the candidates. Ask yourself these final questions:

- Which candidate’s views on the issues do I agree with the most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidate demonstrated the most knowledge on the issues?
- Which candidate has the leadership qualities I am looking for?

Is the choice clear? If so, pick a candidate

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See through distortion techniques

All candidates are trying to sell themselves to voters. Sometimes their language is so skillfully crafted that they distort the truth in ways that are difficult for even the most careful observer to detect. Here are examples of distortion techniques that you should watch for as you review candidates' campaign materials.

Common distortion techniques:

- *Name calling/Appeals to prejudice:* These are attacks on an opponent based on characteristics that will not affect performance in office. Accusations such as, "My opponent is arrogant and full of hot air," do not give any real information about the candidate. Reference to race, ethnicity or marital status can be subtly used to instill prejudice.
- *Rumor mongering:* These include statements such as, "Everyone says my opponent is a crook, but I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing," which imply (but do not state) that the opponent is guilty.
- *Guilt by associations:* These are statements such as, "We all know Candidate B is backed by big money interest," that attack candidates because of their supporters rather than because of their stands on the issues.
- *Catchwords:* These are phrases such as "Law and Order" or "un-American" designed to trigger a knee-jerk emotional reaction rather than 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 they had no control.
- *Promising the sky:* These are unrealistic promises that no elected official could fulfill.
- *Evading real issues:* These include instances in which 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.

Evaluate candidates' use of television

Television is a visual medium dependent on good pictures and timely events to tug at your emotions and keep your interest. Candidates are aware of the potential power of television and try to use it to their advantage. For instance, in a newscast, the picture you see of a crowd with banners and balloons cheering for a candidate may have been staged by a media advisor whose job is to make the candidate look good on television. As you watch news coverage of campaigns, be aware of staged events (also known as photo opportunities) and try to find out what the candidate is saying about the issues.

The same warning applies to televised political advertisements. When you watch political ads, you need to be aware of how the medium influences your reactions. Ask yourself some questions as you watch. Did you find out anything about issues or qualifications or was the ad designed only to affect your attitude or feelings about a candidate? How important were the script, setting and music?

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Candidate Report Card

ISSUES My priority issues	My position	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
<i>Example: health care</i>	<i>I support universal health care</i>			
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES	I want...	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
<i>Example: honesty, flexibility</i>				
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

My Choice _____

Now that you have thought through your choices, DO SOMETHING!

1. Back the candidates you believe in.
2. Talk to your friends and family about “your” candidate.
3. Don’t be afraid to ask questions at candidate meetings, debates, or rallies or when a campaign worker rings your doorbell.
4. Call television and radio stations to praise or criticize campaign spots.
5. Be a letter writer. Tell candidates, newspapers and party leaders how you feel about the issues.
6. Volunteer to work on a campaign or make a donation.
7. If you’re 18, register to vote. Then, on Election Day, go to the polls and vote!