



The League of Women Voters has a long, proud history of focusing election campaigns on the issues and helping voters get clear, honest answers to their questions. These tips on how to “pick a candidate” are just one part of our determination to keep politics a process for the people. Now it’s up to you to do your part, by registering and voting for the candidates of your choice. -- League of Women Voters Education Fund

Pick A Candidate

A major political campaign, with all its excitement, activity and extensive news coverage can bombard you with images and impressions, and yet leave you with very little real information about candidates and their stands on issues. This voter’s guide will help you to follow the campaigns, listen to the candidates, and sort out what you need to know to pick a candidate when you get to the polls.

See Through the Images

Slogans, name recognition and personality are often all that come through in campaign materials—30-to-90-second prepackaged media messages, “photo opportunities” on news shows, political flyers and mass mailings. Come Home, America ... the New Frontier ... the Great Society ... such slogans have always been used by the candidates to project a certain image or create a political climate. But the quickening pace of American living and our dependence on the mass media have greatly changed the way we get our political information. Style, far more than substance, weighs heavily on today’s campaign. A political campaign today is too often an image campaign.

When images have come to dominate the political scene, probing for issues takes hard work and care. But the reward for you is a margin of assurance that you’ll get the information you need to cast your vote with confidence. Let’s look at some investigative techniques you can use.

Take a Good 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? Or 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 issues, even from a 60-second TV or radio 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 or votes. Computerization has made it easy to send “personalized” appeals to selected groups of voters. Candidates can send members of women’s groups one message, for example, and members of veterans’ organizations 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 understand the candidate’s stands on issues. Recognize that the letter is a campaign tactic and try to see what can be learned from it.

Pamphlets and flyers That leaflet slid under your door or handed to you at the store may contain valid substantive information or it may be full of lies, distortions or evasions. 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 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. Don't be swayed or carried away by political bombast. Learn to spot manipulative techniques.

Recognize Distortion Tactics

Name-calling In a classic case, one politician won an election when he alleged that his opponent "once matriculated" and that his opponent's wife was a "thespian." Aside from the ignorant and the absurd, inflammatory statements that distort truth can be just as damaging. A candidate might, for example, call an opponent's behavior "wishywashy" or "two-faced" when it should more accurately be described as flexible or responsive. Don't be sidetracked, either, by attacks on a candidate based on family, ethnicity, gender, race or personal characteristics that don't make a difference in performance.

Rumor-mongering Watch for the unsubstantiated statement or innuendo. Have you ever heard quotes like these in a political campaign? "Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing." "I've heard that Jones is soft on Communism." "I can't speak for Riley and Baker, but I never would have awarded such a low-cost loan to an out-of-state builder." Legal, perhaps, but dirty campaigning. Such "dark hints" can sway an election, if voters are unwary, long before a fair-campaign investigation or a slander suit 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 that, he or she may never be held to account for identifying which expenses are necessary and which are just fat. The loaded question has the same effect. Asking "Where was my opponent when the chips were down about expanding employment 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" or "The union has Jones in its pocket." Every candidate needs support from a wide range of people and groups who may not represent the candidate's views on all the issues. Judge the candidate's own words and deeds.

Catchwords Beware of empty phrases such as "law and order" ... "the American way," that are designed to trigger a knee-jerk, emotional reaction without saying much. If a term defies definition or leaves out great chunks of real life, be on your guard. Try to translate such "buzzwords" into what the candidate is 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 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 woes of the world. Was the candidate really in a position to solve the problem? What other factors were at work? Has there been time to tackle the problem?

Promising the sky There are promises that no one in an elective office can fulfill and problems that are beyond the reach of political solutions. Public officials can accomplish realistic goals, but voters shouldn't expect miracles and candidates shouldn't promise them. When you hear nothing but "promises, promises," consider how realistic those promises really are.

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

Check Out the Sources

Be a Smart Poll Watcher

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

Who sponsored the poll? Were all the figures released? When parties and candidates 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 they slanted? You can easily spot blatantly biased questions that couldn't help but produce a resounding Yes or No, but also look for the 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? Randomly or in such a way to include all segments of the population proportionately? If not, the results may tell you how a small group feels, but nothing about the total population being sampled.

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.

How many "Undecideds"? Were the questions clear and did they reflect real choices? Were the questions asked too far ahead of the election? Remember, once the "undecideds" make up their minds, the results could change drastically.

How long ago? 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 political campaigns. Look for polls that compare current figures and past ones, and try to spot trends.

Use Group Ratings Shrewdly

Some organizations representing special interest groups (business, the environment, labor, the elderly, etc.) sift through senators' and representatives' myriad votes on crucial bills and rate them on how closely they match one group's point of view. Similar ratings are often done for state and even local candidates. These ratings can help you, the voter; they can also be misleading. So use them wisely, as a way to gauge incumbents' positions, but never take them as the final word.

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

What is the group's bias? Which issues are important to its constituents? 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? Sometimes, for instance, the revealing vote is on an amendment, not on the main bill. Do the group's choices and explanations help you sort it all out?

Rate the Candidate On How They Campaign

The way a candidate runs a campaign can provide important clues to how that candidate will perform as a public official, once elected. A contender 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. Take another look at See Through the Images to rate campaign materials and statements. Then check the following criteria for an open campaign.

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 campaign ads provide clear information on issue positions? Can you easily obtain position papers or answers to your questions? Are a candidate's qualifications clearly stated, and are they the ones that will count in public office? Is the candidate's voting record easy to get?

Openness Seeing a candidate "pressing the flesh" in a parking lot or at a huge political rally won't tell you much about the candidate's stance. Most of us must rely on the candidate's use of the media to find out more. Here are some things to watch for.

- 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?

- 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? A disinterested party? If you’re not sure, call the station or campaign headquarters and ask.
- Where does the candidate appear? Does the campaign emphasize media events, where the candidate can be seen but not heard – a parade, a beauty contest, a county fair? Talking only on narrow, sure-fire subjects to safe audiences is a cop out. Voters deserve a broader perspective.

On the Big Issues

Pinpoint the issues that are important to you. Decide what changes you feel that your community, state and country need most. What do you want to keep the same? Which of your interests are served by the programs each candidate is proposing? As you ponder, weigh 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 .

Now ... Pick a Candidate

The checklist on the next page is a sampler of national issues. Add your own. Then make new charts for state and local issues. Rank the issues in order of their importance to you. Find out where the candidates stand on your top priorities. Which candidate most closely shares your views on important matters?

Your priority number	The Issues	The candidate whose position is most like yours
	The economy -- How do we reduce the deficit ... and keep the economy healthy? How can unemployment be reduced? Should we cut government spending? For what? Should we raise taxes? Provide jobs – through public service programs? By stimulating the private sector? By encouraging or limiting foreign trade?	
	Environment – What needs to be done to preserve our air, water, energy and land resources? How can we solve the problems of hazardous wastes? Acid rain? How should costs be apportioned? Are current regulations adequate? What about enforcement?	
	Government spending – How do we set budget priorities? Are we spending too much on some programs? Too little on others? If cuts are needed, where and how should they be made? Do the effects of cuts fall unfairly on any one group? Is revenue adequate? What are the best revenue sources?	
	Foreign Policy – Should we take more of a leadership role in the world? What does that mean? What specific measures should we take to ease tensions between the U.S. and the USSR? In the Middle East? In Latin America? Should we increase defense spending, or cut it back? How should defense dollars be spent? What about arms control? What should be the U.S. role in the United Nations? Should we invest more in economic development aid?	
	Social services – What role should the government play in meeting the needs of the poor, the elderly and the disabled? The special needs of women? How can we best help the disadvantaged to become self sufficient? How can adequate housing be assured for all who need it? Should changes be made in Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare programs? Which levels of government can most fairly and effectively supply such services?	

List other national issues that you think are important. Assign them a priority. Do the same for state and local issues and candidates. Then make your choice count in the voting booth.

Now that you've thought through your choices...

DO SOMETHING!

Back candidates you believe in. Talk to your friends and co-workers about “your” candidate. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions at candidate meetings, at rallies and when a campaign worker rings your doorbell. Call TV and radio stations to praise or criticize campaign spots. Be a letter writer. Tell candidates, newspapers and party leaders how you feel about the issues.

Then:

VOTE

This publication has been written and published with the LWV Education Fund Dollars – Picking the Candidate
www.tiffinohio.com/lwv/publications/pub-picking.htm - www.lwv.org



The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.