

HOW TO PICK A CANDIDATE



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF THE SAN ANTONIO AREA

A trusted nonpartisan election resource

STEP 1: STUDY THE CAMPAIGN

CRITERIA TO JUDGE 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. Both are important. Your first step is to decide which issues you care about and what qualities you want in a leader.

When you consider issues, think about community, state and national problems and challenges that you want government leaders to address.

When you consider leadership qualities, think about the characteristics you believe an effective leader should possess.

SEE THROUGH THE IMAGES

Slogans, name recognition and personality are often all that come through in campaign materials such as brief prepackaged media messages, political flyers and mass mailings. Slogans like “Come Home America,” “The New Frontier” and “The Great Society” have always been used by candidates to project a certain image or create a political climate. Our dependence on the mass media has greatly changed the way we receive political information. Style, far more than substance, weighs in heavily on today’s campaigns.

When images dominate the political scene, probing for candidates’ stand on issues takes deliberate effort. However, this is the information voters need to vote with confidence.

STEP 2: LOOK AT CAMPAIGN INFORMATION

GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE CANDIDATE

There are a variety of sources where you can find information:

Campaign websites and social media

Almost all candidates now have websites, and many are on social media. Because these are the most direct ways to engage with voters, you should find the most comprehensive list of positions on these sites. View the material as their main “sales pitch.” Is it a positive or negative message? Are there explanations about why a candidate supports a particular viewpoint? Is the information comprehensive and based on facts? Does the candidate provide their background and experience?

As campaigns progress, websites are often updated, so the amount of available information might increase over time. Candidates on social media are likely to post their thoughts on the news of the day, so you can check them regularly.

Television and radio

When you see or hear a paid political ad, ask yourself: What did I learn about the candidate from the ad? Did I find anything about the candidate’s position on issues or qualifications? Was the ad designed only to affect feelings or attitudes about the candidate? Was the ad designed to appeal to women, minorities, older voters, single-issue groups? You can learn about issues, even from a commercial, if the candidate wants you to, or if you can separate the glitter from the substance. The same caution applies to interviews and candidate debates, where candidates can either state facts or say what they want their base to hear.

Direct mail

Candidates still use direct mail to solicit funds or votes, especially toward the end of election season. It is now easy to send “personalized” appeals to targeted groups of voters. Candidates can send one message to members of women’s groups, for example, and another to members of veteran’s organizations. Therefore, if you are aware that you must read between the lines to get the full story, the direct mail 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 slipped 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 or stands on issues? Be on the lookout for accusations or other statements about opponents, especially if made so close to election day that they can’t be answered or denied.

Emotional appeals

Listen to a candidate’s appeals and arguments. Is the candidate trying to make you mad enough to accept certain arguments without question? Maybe a poverty-stricken childhood should get your sympathy, but it shouldn’t get your vote. Look for the facts. Learn to spot manipulative techniques.

Rely on unbiased, nonpartisan sources of information

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that does not support or oppose any political party or candidate.

The League of Women Voters’ VOTE411.org and the printed Voters Guide contain candidates’ responses to questions on issues important to voters posed by the League. The Voters Guides are available two weeks prior to early voting in all public libraries. They are also available on the League website, lwvsa.org.



KEEP UP WITH THE LATEST NEWS ABOUT VOTING IN SAN ANTONIO. VISIT LWVSA.ORG

RECOGNIZE DISTORTION TACTICS

Name-calling

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. Ignorant or absurd rumors, inflammatory statements that distort truth can be damaging. A candidate might, for example, call an opponent's behavior "wishy-washy" when it should more accurately be described as flexible.

Rumor-mongering

Watch for unsubstantiated statements or insinuations. Have you ever heard during a political campaign: "Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge of any wrong doing"? Or "I've heard that Jones is soft on communism"? If voters are unwary, such dark hints can sway an election, 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 the candidate's opponent favors it. If candidates get away with making an empty claim like that, they may never have 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.

Catchphrases and buzzwords

Beware of empty phrases such as "law and order" or "The American Way," which 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

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 she or he 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. 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

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.



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STEP 3: UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES

ISSUES IMPORTANT TO YOU

Examine 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 the issue. Consider what you have to trade off to get what you want.

EVADING REAL ISSUES

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

STEP 4: EVALUATE THE CANDIDATES

EVALUATE THE CANDIDATES' STANDS ON ISSUES

As you read materials you collect, keep a journal and record the candidates' stands on your priority issues. Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about their stands on issues?

EXAMINE THE CANDIDATES' LEADERSHIP ABILITIES

How can you know if someone will be honest, open and able to act under pressure if elected to office?

- Look at the candidates' background and experience. How well prepared are they for the job?
- Watch the candidates in action. Do they accept speaking engagements or participate in debates before diverse groups, even groups that may not be sympathetic?
- Read the campaign material carefully to find any insights into the candidate personalities. Do they emphasize issues or just image? Are they accurate?

LEARN HOW OTHER PEOPLE VIEW THE CANDIDATES

The opinions of others can help clarify your own views, but remember you may be the most careful observer of all.

Seek the opinions of others in your community who keep track of political campaigns. Interview three people (not family members) to find out whom they support and why. Learn what has shaped their opinions. Was it an idea or program proposed by the candidate? A particular issue or party about which they feel strongly?

“Someone struggled for your right to vote.
Use it.”

— Susan B. Anthony

Learn about endorsements. This is a way for interest groups and organizations to give a “stamp of approval” and provide voters with 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 our earth. You can get a list of endorsements from campaign headquarters.

Find out where the candidates get the funds to finance their campaigns. Do they use their own money or funds from a few wealthy contributors? From many small donors 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 given to the government and are reported by the media. How might these contributions affect the candidate’s conduct in office?

BE SMART ABOUT POLLS

Throughout the campaign, opinion polls will be taken by a variety of groups to evaluate public support for the different candidates. Polls can reveal who is leading at a certain point in the race. As you read the polls, ask yourself these questions:

- Who sponsored the poll?
- Were all the figures released? (When parties and candidates pay for polls, they may only release favorable data.)
- What kinds of questions were asked?
- Were the respondents selected randomly?
- How many people were included in the polling? Are they likely voters?

STEP 5: RATE THE DEBATE

Before watching a televised debate, be well prepared to understand the questions and answers and to evaluate the candidates’ performances. Before the event, get some background on the debate sponsor and follow any conflicts over the debate itself.

RATE THE DEBATE FORMAT

- A good format should be fair, should provide information about the candidates and issues and should help you judge the candidates’ leadership abilities.
- Does it allow the differences between the candidates to surface?
- Does it make it easy for the candidates to discuss the issues and respond to opponents?

RATE THE MODERATOR/PANELISTS

- Are the questions fair and equally tough on all the candidates?
- Are the questions clear? Is there enough information so that viewers understand the meaning of the answers? Are follow-up questions used to pin down the candidates?
- Do the questions cover all the important issues?

“We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”

– President Thomas Jefferson

RATE THE CANDIDATES

As you watch, be aware of your reactions to both the substance of the candidates' remarks and the visual images that are conveyed. The power of images can cause voters to overlook what is being said. Are you influenced by the age, sex, clothes or physical characteristics of the candidates? Who appeared more relaxed, more sincere, more confident? Who uses television better by looking directly at you? In judging substance, decide who answers or evades the questions. Do the candidates tell you their stands on the issues, or do they respond with emotional appeals or slogans? If anyone attacks his or her opponent, is it personal or directed at the other candidate's policies? Do the candidates seem well informed and give answers consistent with previous positions? Are their answers realistic or are they just campaign promises?

STEP 6: SORT IT ALL OUT

FINAL REVIEW

- Review the information you have collected and ask yourself these final questions:
- Which candidate's views on the issues do I agree with most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidate demonstrated the most knowledge of the issues?
- Which candidate has the leadership qualities I am looking for?
- Is the choice clear? Then pick a candidate.

VOTE!

- Back the candidate you believe in.
- Talk to others about "your" candidate.
- Be a letter writer. Tell candidates, newspapers and party leaders how you feel about the issues or the campaign.
- Volunteer to work on a campaign.
- On election day, VOTE!



VOTE AMERICA
EVERY VOTE COUNTS



VOTE

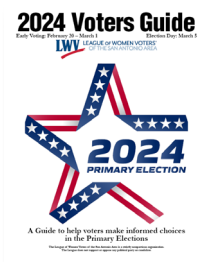
MAKE INFORMED CHOICES

Know who the candidates are and what they stand for.

Vote for candidates whose views most closely match your own.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Printed Voters Guide



Check the League's nonpartisan Voters Guide available in all public libraries. It includes candidate responses to questions on major policy issues posed by the League.

Digital Voters Guide



Get information on your customized ballot with 5 easy steps:

- **Step 1:** Enter your address to find the races on your ballot
- **Step 2:** Get your personalized ballot
- **Step 3:** Read about and compare candidates
- **Step 4:** Mark your informed choices
- **Step 5:** Print your choices to use as a reference when you vote

Sign up for election reminders and to know when the Voters Guide is available using the QR code at right. Your information is for LWVSA use and will not be shared.

