



League of Women Voters of Broome and Tioga Counties

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Women Voters of Broome & Tioga Counties

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How to Judge a Candidate

Goodfellow, Margaret, League of Women Voters of Broome and Tioga Counties, Revised 10/7/21. Adapted from League of Women Voters of the United States, “*How to Judge a Candidate*” 9/29/20 <https://www.lwv.org/educating-voters/how-judge-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.

How do voters compare candidates? To be honest, all too often, slogans, name recognition and personality are the only criteria. 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. Here are six suggestions:

One: 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 in people in government to address. Also consider what party the candidate belongs to, and the party position taken on the issues. For example, you may be interested in national security, government funding for student loans, unemployment, or immigration.

What are the characteristics you want in an effective leader. Do you look for intelligence, honesty? Communication skills? What else?

Two: Gather materials about the candidates.

Put together information about the candidates. Collect any records you can find on the candidates. Sources of information you may choose to review include:

- websites of candidate, political party, and social media
- campaign literature
- direct mail letters
- *credible* news sources (newspapers, television, internet, radio reports)
- radio and television ads
- candidates’ speeches and position statements



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Three: Evaluate candidates' stands on issues.

Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about the candidates' stands on issues?

Four: 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? Do campaign materials emphasize issues or image? Here are ways to read between the lines as you evaluate the candidates' leadership qualities:

- Look at the candidates' background and their experience. How prepared are they for the job?
- Observe the candidates' campaigns. Do they give speeches to diverse 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 are seen but not heard?* (For instance, a ribbon cutting ceremony to open a new bridge, rather than talking about transportation).

Five: 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 are 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 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? Was it a particular issue about which they feel strongly? Is support based upon long-standing party loyalty?
- **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. Get a list of endorsements for each candidate. Find out what these groups and individuals stand for and find out why they are endorsing this candidate.



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Five: Continued.

- **Look into campaign contributions.** For Federal level candidates, go to the [Federal Elections Commission](#). For State and local, go to the [NYS Board of Elections](#).

Where do the candidates get the funds to finance their campaigns? Do they use their own money or raise funds from wealthy donors, 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.

Learn about money in politics and stories on campaign finance. How can contributions affect the candidates' conduct in office? You might want to analyze an incumbent's voting record on issues important to PACs and other campaign contributors.

- **Opinion polls** are conducted 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? Were questions slanted or unbiased? How were respondents selected – randomly or in such a way to include all segments of the population? How many people were in the poll sample?

Six: See through distortion techniques.

Sometimes candidate language is so masterfully crafted it distorts 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.

- **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 factual information about the candidate. Reference to race, ethnicity, marital status, and gender identity can be subtly used to instill prejudice.



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Six: Continued.

- ***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 association:*** 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 an emotional reaction rather than to inform.
- ***Passing the blame:*** These are instances in which a candidate denies responsibility for an action or blames opponents for things over which they had no control.
- ***Promising the sky:*** These are unrealistic promises that no elected official could fulfill. If it sounds too good to be true, be suspicious.
- ***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 potential problems or costs.

As you review all your information, you will have the information and tools to be confident that you have made the best effort to come to an educated and reasoned decision when casting a vote for candidates for elected office.

Make. Democracy. Work. Vote!