



Resources for the informed voter

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For The Times of Trenton

By

One week from tomorrow, New Jersey will hold an election in which voters will fill all 120 seats in the Legislature. You'd hardly know it from the state's official website.

"It's almost impossible to find out anything about who is running, what district you are in, and so on, without searching in many different places," complains Ingrid Reed, a public-policy expert and former director of the Eagleton Institute's New Jersey Project.

"Some other states, such as Michigan and Virginia, provide voter guides with photos and contact information for the candidates. Not New Jersey. This information should be available on the front page of the state's site, with a big reminder about Election Day.

"Kermit the Frog sings 'It's Not Easy Being Green.' Well, it's not easy being a voter in New Jersey."

Still, there are ways conscientious citizens can inform themselves about the candidates for the 40 Senate seats and 80 Assembly seats and their positions on key issues affecting the state.



George Amick

New Jersey's newspapers are doing what they traditionally do at election time: publish stories, columns and letters to the editor about the races. For example, election coverage in The Times in the days leading up to Nov. 8 will focus on legislative contests in the Mercer County area. Those stories can be found online at topics.nj.com/tag/times-vote-2011/index.html.

In addition, independent, nonpartisan state and national organizations are making a diligent effort to give voters online access to what they need to know. These groups ask every candidate, Republican, Democratic, third-party and independent, where he or she stands on 10 or more hot-button issues, including property taxes, jobs, charter schools, state-provided scholarships to private schools, state funding for family-planning services, transportation

funding and affordable housing, and publish the answers of those willing to respond.

Some of the websites are more user-friendly than others, but each of them repays a voter's visits with the kind of information that's missing from the state's official site, such as candidate biographies and public statements, interest-group ratings, financial and campaign funding reports and incumbents' key votes. Reed points out that the most basic thing voters can learn from these sources is simply which district they now live in; last spring's reapportionment process moved at least one-third of the state's municipalities to new districts.

Of the organizations, the oldest and best known is the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, which has been around since its pre-World War I beginnings in the women's suffrage movement. The League's voter guide, which can be found at lwnj.org, contains the candidates' responses to its questionnaire, as well as a description of the statewide public question dealing with sports betting and its pros and cons. The League provides a toll-free hotline, 1-800-792-VOTE (8683), which it staffs during business hours and will make available on Election Day from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. for voters in need of help.

A newcomer, but an excellent source of election information, is NJ Spotlight, a foundation-funded online news service with which Reed is associated. Its voter guide, found at njspotlight.com, provides basic biographical information and policy positions for the legislative candidates, as well as analyses of some individual races written by NJ Spotlight correspondents.

The website of the American Association of Retired Persons, AARP.org/yourvote, provides information on the New Jersey legislative elections, as well as current contests in other states, including Virginia and Kentucky. The 17 questions AARP posed to New Jersey candidates are on topics of concern to the general population as well as senior-specific issues, such as Medicaid funding and the so-called senior freeze on property taxes.

Project Vote Smart, at votesmart.org, is a national organization that was founded in the 1990s by 40 national leaders of both parties, including former Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, and provides what one magazine called the kind of information on national, state and local elections that would make the Founding Fathers "weep for joy." It, too, has a hotline for voter information: 1-888-VOTESMART (868-3762).

New Jersey politicians vary in their willingness to state their positions on the issues.

Earlier this month, Project Vote Smart reported that only 17 percent of the state's legislative candidates had answered its questionnaire and thus passed what it called its "political courage test." "Even following repetitious requests by mail, fax and e-mail, including contacts from leaders of their own political parties, New Jersey candidates still failed to provide voters with information on how they may handle the job if hired this November," the organization stated. "Project Vote Smart has found that party leaders and consultants from both major parties are advising candidates not to respond to the test (because) it will limit the candidates' ability to control their campaign messages and it will expose them to opposition research."

Some New Jersey candidates who ignored Project Vote Smart did respond to one or more of the New Jersey-based organizations' questionnaires. Still, there are many who refuse to answer any of them. By their silence, these candidates are sending a message to the electorate. The message isn't positive, and it's one that voters are entitled to weigh carefully when they make their choices.

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