

Op-Ed Article by Adele Vexler

The League of Women Voters of Lawrence Township is pleased to offer voters tips on how to choose a candidate in the upcoming election.

First, please note that the Leagues of the United States and of New Jersey have web sites which are always available to give you needed election information – www.vote411.org as well as www.lwvnj.org. You may also telephone the League of New Jersey's Trenton Office during business hours: 1-800-792-VOTE (1-800-792-8683)

The traditional media: newspapers, magazines, radio and television still have an enormous influence on American politics. However, in recent years the public has turned to democratizing trends that increasingly allow candidates, supporters, voters and the media, from all over the world, to respond quickly to events as they happen. Radio talk shows, the Internet and 24 hour cable news channels offer a growing assortment of election information.

With the use of personal computers, we can access biographies supplied by the candidates themselves, clearly stating their issue priorities and their tactics for achievement. Voters may correspond with candidates to express their own opinion or to ask the candidates for clarification.

However, here are some tips for choosing a candidate:

- 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. Both are important. The first step is to decide the issues YOU care about and the qualities YOU want in a leader.

- Recognize distortion techniques.

Name-calling appeals to prejudices. These are attacks on opponents based on characteristics that will not affect performance in office.

- Recognize loaded statements.

“I oppose wasteful spending.” It doesn't say much and implies that the candidate's opponent favors it. Rate the candidates on how they campaign.

This will give you clues as to how he or she will perform as a public official once elected. A contender who runs an open, issue-oriented campaign can be expected to become an accessible, forthright and thoughtful public official.

- Information

Do campaign ads provide clear information on issue positions? Can you easily obtain position papers or answers to your questions? Is the candidate's voting record easy to get?

- Rumor mongering

Watch for the unsubstantiated statements and innuendo. Have you ever heard quotes such as these in a political campaign? "Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge of wrong-doing." Or, "I've heard that Jones is soft on communism."

- 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 the 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.

- Spot phony issues

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 are the other factors 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.

- 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 leaves it at that. A 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.

Here are some websites that will help you become an informed voter:

Project Vote Smart

Information on United States candidates, ballot measures, issues and legislation, and voter registration, provided by a non-profit group.

www.votesmart.org

Fact Check

Monitors the factual accuracy of what is said by major US political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.

www.factcheck.org

New Jersey Policy Perspective

A nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that conducts research on public policy issues in New Jersey. Has good information on taxes.

www.njpp.org

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

Seeks to spark fundamental change in American public life - so that people can tap their own potential to make hope real.

www.theharwoodinstitute.org

PolitiFact

A project of the St. Petersburg Times and Congressional Quarterly to help you find the truth in the presidential campaign. This site has a "Truth-o-Meter" and a "Flop-o-Meter."

www.politifact.com

and finally, the League of Women Voters own site:

VOTE411

Information from the League of Women Voters on voter registration and laws (by state), how to learn about the candidates and the issues.

www.vote411.org

Last, but not least, do not vote alone. Bring your neighbor, your brother-in-law, etc. Let's ALL vote!

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