

# How to Judge a 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's a time to consider the issues that you care about and decide which candidate you support.

But how do voters go about comparing and then judging the candidates? All too often, slogans, controversy and personality are all that come through in campaign materials. However, it is possible to move beyond style and toward substance. Check out these steps to help you judge a candidate and make the best choice for you on Election Day. [Visit our debate watching kit for more helpful resources!](#)

## 1. 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 that they would bring to the office. Your first step in choosing a candidate is to decide what 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 people in government to address. Also consider what party the candidate belongs to and the typical stance the party takes on the issues. For example, you may be interested in national security, government funding for student loans or job opportunities in your community.

When you consider leadership qualities, think about the characteristics you want in an effective leader. Do you look for intelligence, honesty, an ability to communicate? What else?

## 2. Find out about the candidates

First, find out which candidates are running. Voters everywhere can find out about who will be on their ballot by using the League's [www.VOTE411.org](http://www.VOTE411.org). Other materials include:

- Media reports of candidates' speeches and events
- Candidates' social media platforms
- Candidates' websites, literature & ads



As you read the materials you collect, keep track of what you've learned. Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about the candidates' stands on issues? How do the candidates' positions align with your values and opinions?

### 3. 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? Here are some ways to read between the lines as you evaluate the candidates' leadership qualities:

- Look at the candidates' background and experience. How prepared are they for the job?
- Observe the campaigns. Do they give speeches to different 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 can be seen but not heard?
- Review the candidates' websites and materials. Do campaign materials emphasize issues or image? Are they accurate?

### 4. Learn how other people view the candidate



- Listen and talk with the people in your life. What has shaped their political opinions? What issues do they think about when they head to the voting booth?
- Learn who has endorsed the candidates. Interest groups and organizations, as well as newspapers, often endorse specific candidates for office. Endorsements can provide clues to the issues a candidate supports. For instance, a candidate

endorsed by the Sierra Club (an environmental organization) will likely be in favor of legislation that protects the environment. A candidate endorsed by the National Rifle Association might be opposed to gun control laws.

- Look into campaign contributions. Where do the candidates get the funds to finance their campaigns? Do they use their own money or raise funds from a few wealthy donors, from many small contributors or from Political Action Committees? Many types of information about campaign contributions must be reported to the government and are watched by the press and available at [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org). How might these campaign contributions affect the candidates' conduct in office?
- Pay attention to polling data. Throughout the campaign, opinion polls will be taken 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 as well as a wealth of other information. As you read the polls, ask these questions: Who sponsored the poll? Was the poll produced by a trusted and independent entity? What kinds of questions were asked? Were they slanted or unbiased? How many people were included in the poll sample?

## 5. Cut through the rhetoric

All candidates are trying to sell themselves to voters. Sometimes their language is so skillfully crafted that they distort 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.



### Common distortion techniques:

- *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 real information about the candidate. Reference to race, ethnicity, gender or marital status can be subtly used to instill prejudice.
- *Rumor mongering:* These include statements such as, "Everyone says my opponent is a crook, but I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing." These kinds of statements 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.
- *Catchphrases:* These are phrases designed to trigger a knee-jerk emotional reaction rather than to inform.
- *Passing the blame:* These are instances in which a candidate denies responsibility for an action or blames an opponent for things over which they had no control.
- *Promising the sky:* These are unrealistic promises that no elected official could fulfill.
- *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 possible problems or costs.

## 6. Evaluate candidates' use of television

As you watch news coverage of campaigns, be wary of staged, "made for TV" events and try to find out what the candidate is actually saying about the issues.

The same warning applies to political advertisements. When you watch political ads, be aware of how they influence your reactions. Did you find out anything about issues or qualifications, or was the ad designed only to affect your attitude or feelings about a candidate? How important were the script, setting and music?

## 7. Sorting it all out

Reflect on everything you have learned. Ask yourself these final questions:

- Which candidate's views on the issues do I agree with the most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidate demonstrated the most knowledge on the issues?
- Which candidate has the leadership qualities I am looking for?
- How can I get ready to cast my vote on Election Day?

## 8. Vote, and Ask your Friends and Family to do the same!

- Register to vote, then ask your friends and family to do the same. Get started at [www.VOTE411.org](http://www.VOTE411.org).
- Volunteer for or make donations to candidates you believe in.
- Attend candidate meetings, debates, or rallies, and follow them on social media.
- Encourage the people in your life to learn about the people who want to represent you in office. This democracy is about all of us, and we decide.

