

How to Pick a Candidate

Adapted from the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

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 the qualities you want in a leader.

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

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

See through the images — Slogans, name recognition and personality are often all that come through in campaign materials: 30- to 90- second prepackaged media messages, “photo opportunities” on news shows, political flyers, and mass mailings. Slogans such as “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. The quickening pace of American living and our dependence on the mass media have greatly changed the way we get our political information. Style, far more than substance, weighs in heavily on today’s campaigns. A political campaign today is often an image campaign.

When images have come to dominate the political scene, probing for issues takes hard work and care. But the reward for you is a margin of assurance that you’ll get the information you need to cast your 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, including:

- Campaign websites and social media
- Campaign literature
- Direct-mail letters sent to targeted voters asking for support and funds.

- Press releases.
- Radio and television ads
- Candidates' speeches
- Candidate debates

Campaign websites and social media — Almost all candidates now have websites, and many are on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Because these are the most direct ways to engage with voters searching for information, you should find the most comprehensive list of positions on these sites. Knowing that this is information put forward by the candidates, view the material as the main 'sales pitch' that the candidate will use. Is it a positive or negative message? Does the candidate provide their background and experience for voters to evaluate? Are there explanations about why a candidate supports a particular viewpoint? Is the information comprehensive and based on facts?

As campaigns progress, websites are often updated, so the amount of available information might increase over time. Certainly, candidates on social media will post their thoughts on the news of the day, so you can check them over time and see responses to current events.

Television and radio commercials — When you see or hear a paid political ad, ask yourself some questions. What did you learn about the candidate from the ad? Did you find anything about issues or qualifications? Or was the ad designed only to affect feelings or attitudes about the candidate? How important was the music, the setting, the script? Was the ad designed to appeal to women, minorities, older voters, single-issue groups? You can learn about issues, even from a 60-second TV or radio commercial, if the candidate wants you to, or if you can separate the glitter from the substance.

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 selected groups of voters. Candidates can send one message to members of women's groups, for example, and another to members of veteran's organizations. However, if you are aware that you must read between the lines to get the full story, the direct-mail letter 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 superficial imagery or even 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. Then decide if they are targeted to your emotions alone. 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. Don’t be swayed or carried away by political bombast. Learn to spot manipulative techniques.

Recognize distortion tactics.

Name-calling — In a classic case, one politician won an election when he alleged that his opponent “once matriculated” and that his opponent’s wife was a “thespian.” In addition to ignorant or absurd rumors, inflammatory statements that distort truth can be just as damaging. A candidate might, for example, call an opponent’s behavior “wishy-washy” or “two-faced” when it should more accurately be described as flexible or responsive. Don’t be side-tracked, either, by attacks on a candidate based on family, ethnicity, gender, race, or personal characteristics that don’t make a difference in performance.

Rumor-mongering — Watch for the unsubstantiated statement or innuendo. Have you ever heard quotes like these in a political campaign? “Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing.” “I’ve heard that Jones is soft on communism.” “I can’t speak for Riley or Baker, but I would never have awarded such a low-cost loan to an out-of-state builder.” Legal, perhaps, but dirty campaigning. Such dark hints can sway an election, if voters are unwary, 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 a candidate gets away with an empty claim like that, he or she 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.

Guilt by association — Look carefully at criticism of a candidate based on that candidate’s supporters: “We all know Smith is backed by big-money interest” or “the union has Jones in its pocket.” Every candidate needs support from a wide range of people and groups who may not represent the candidate’s view on all the issues. Judge the candidate’s own words and deeds.

Catchwords — 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 “buzz-words” into what the candidate is really trying to say.

Baiting — Politics is a tough game. But 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. 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 other factors were at work? Has there been time to tackle the problem?

Promising the sky — There are promises that 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. When you hear nothing but "promises, promises," consider how realistic those promises really are.

Step 3: Understand the Issues

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. Look at cause and effect. 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 instance, for a candidate to say, "I've always been concerned about the high cost of health care," and leave it at that. And the candidate who claims to have a secret, easy plan to solve a tough problem is 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.

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

Deciding if a candidate will be a good leader is difficult. How can you know if someone will be honest, open, and able to act under pressure if elected to office? Here are some ways to read between the lines:

- 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.

1. **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?
2. **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.
3. **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 a Smart Poll Watcher

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 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 to vote?

Step 5: Rate the Debate

You should enjoy watching a televised debate because you are so well prepared to understand the questions and answers and to evaluate the candidates' performance. 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 interesting and fair, should provide information about the candidates and issues and should help you judge the candidates' leadership abilities.

- Does it hold your interest?
- 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

- Is the moderator in control of the debate? Does the moderator or any of the panelists talk too much?
- 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?

Rate the Candidates.

As you watch, be aware of your reactions both to the substance of the candidates' remarks and the visual images that are conveyed. They can be powerful. Clearly, 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, for example? 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

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.

Do Something!

1. Back the candidate you believe in.
2. Talk to others about "your" candidate.
3. Be a letter writer. Tell candidates, newspapers, and party leaders how you feel about the issues or the campaign.
4. Volunteer to work on a campaign.
5. When you turn 18, register to vote. Then on election day VOTE!

Step 7: Register to Vote!

See [How to Register to Vote](#).

Step 8: Vote, It's in Your Best Interest!

At the polls

In general, polls in municipal, state, and national elections are open in Massachusetts between 7:00am to 8:00pm. The hours may vary for local elections. Sample ballots and instructions are posted at the polls on election day.

When you enter the polling place, give your address and name to the election official at the check-in table. If you need help, ask an election official at the check-in table.

One Vote Makes the Difference

- In 1960, John F. Kennedy won the presidential election by a margin of less than one vote per precinct.
- In 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidency by a margin of fewer than three votes per precinct.

- In 1996, Ron Wyden won election to the US Senate to replace Senator Robert Packwood by one percentage point.

Democracy truly works only when people exercise their right to participate in the electoral process.

Make democracy work — get involved!