

Voting: Choosing a Candidate

Candidates can be judged in two ways: the positions they take on issues and the leadership qualities or experience they would bring to the office. Both are important.

When you consider issues, think about community, state, and national problems that you want people in government to address. Examine the issues that are important to you. Decide what changes you feel that your community, state, and country need most.

Be aware of distortion tactics. 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? Try to look beyond the emotion and identify the facts, then check the facts to see that they are accurate.

Beware of empty phrases such as "law and order" or "The American Way," which are designed to trigger an emotional reaction without offering much information. If a term defies definition, demonizes a group, or is missing any factual evidence, be on your guard. Try to translate such political rhetoric into what the candidate is really trying to say. Judge the candidate's viability using their own words and actions.

All candidates make political promises, but there are promises that can be fulfilled 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 are those promises.

Reliable leaders spend more time taking responsibility for their own plans and actions than blaming others. 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 of the current problems. Was the incumbent really in a position to solve the problem? What other factors were at work? Has there been time to tackle the problem? You may want to ask yourself, what solutions does the challenger have? Are their plans realistic? Would they produce results that work better for you?

When you consider leadership qualities, think about the characteristics of an effective leader. Do you look for intelligence, honesty, an ability to communicate? Do you want to elect someone who demonstrates respect for others? Does the candidate have specific ideas and policies that will impact your life? Does the candidate offer support or criticism for programs and policies that are important to you?

Image and style often dominate our political environment today. Hype and spin can distract us from the important facts and make it hard to understand the issues. 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 candidate's background and experience. How well prepared are they for the job?
- Watch the candidates in action. Do they accept speaking engagements to participate in debates before diverse groups, even groups that may not be sympathetic to their views?

- Read campaign material carefully to find any insights into the candidate's personality. Do they emphasize issues or just image? Are they accurate?

Seek the opinions of others in your community who keep track of political campaigns. Try asking three people outside of your family about which candidates they support and why. Learn what has shaped their opinions. Is there a specific idea or program proposed by the candidate? Do they feel strongly about a particular issue or political party?

Choosing the best candidates to vote for does require some work and care, but the reward for you is being able to cast your vote with confidence.

The League of Women Voters of DeKalb County provides nonpartisan information on voting, elections, and the candidates. You will find resources at our website: LWVDKC.org/vote.