

The Seattle Times Newspapers In Education presents

# Electing the President: A Guide to the Election Process

Produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters



Thank you for joining our Wednesday series about the presidential election, produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters through November 5. Last spring's chapters are posted online at [lwvwa.org](http://lwvwa.org) and will help students of all ages to understand the people, parties and issues regarding our election process.

## Week Three: The General Election: Strategies and Tactics – 1

### The General Election Campaign

Today's general election contest is an elaborate production, with the candidates and their supporters crisscrossing the country and blanketing the airwaves with poll-tested political commercials.

The goal of the presidential candidates during the fall is to appeal to as many different kinds of people in as many different ways as possible. To accomplish this in a country where more than 200 million individuals are eligible to vote is a staggering task. It requires an effective national organization, enormous discipline on the part of the candidates and their campaigns and large numbers of staff and volunteers, not to mention a great deal of money.

### Campaign Strategy:

**A shift to the center** — Fall brings with it a number of strategic decisions for the candidates and their campaign organizations. But perhaps the most important decision facing the candidates as they approach the general election season is how to refine their message so it resonates with a majority of the American electorate.

Why tinker with a message that worked fine in the primaries? Because in the primaries the candidates were appealing to voters of their own parties, but now they are trying to connect with a much larger audience. This means they need to

adopt a more mainstream message, a message with broad appeal, beyond the party faithful.

"Shifting to the center," as it is called, is often a tightrope walk for the candidates, because they don't want to offend their primary supporters or make it appear as though they are abandoning their earlier commitments.

### Campaign Strategy:

**Targeting a candidate's appeal** — At the same time that the candidates have to reach out to a broad cross section of the American electorate, they must also decide how to target their campaigning for maximum effect. Because of the limited amounts of time and money available to candidates, it simply isn't possible for them to wage a full-fledged campaign in every state or among all voters. This means that the candidates have to focus on specific states and regions that they feel will be decisive in determining the winner of the election.

For a well-run campaign, that means keeping the focus on the Electoral College votes required to win the election. Voters do not elect the president directly; they vote for electors who are pledged to vote for a candidate. Almost all the states award their electoral votes to the candidate who receives the most popular votes in the state. (The Electoral College will be discussed in more detail in a later lesson.)

Candidates have to target their appearances and their advertising to specific groups of voters. To help cover the many places they can't visit, candidates rely on state and local party organizations to generate interest in the campaign and turn out the vote.

**Targeting key states** — Candidates devote their energies to the largest states that they feel they have a chance of winning. At the same time, they tend to make only token appearances in states where they are assured of victory, while conceding those states where their chances are slim.

The candidates generally focus their campaigning on "swing states" that could go either way in the presidential election.

... **And swing voters** — Just as there are swing states, there are also swing voters — individuals who don't necessarily vote along party lines or whose votes are still up for grabs. With the number of independent voters making up a sizeable 10 to 12 percent of the American electorate in recent years, presidential campaigns have focused on attracting the support of this all-important group.

... **Without ignoring the base** — The importance of swing states and swing voters doesn't mean the candidates can ignore their most loyal supporters; in fact, they do so at their peril. For the candidates, the parties, and independent organizations, a major focus as Election Day approaches is to organize comprehensive get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns that bring loyal voters to the polls.

## Learn More:

■ **Presidential choices:** Find articles about important decisions or policy choices the current President is making. Pretend you are a news reporter at a press conference with presidential candidates. Write questions you'd ask them about the current President and what choices they would make. Now try to find the answer to your questions using the newspaper and the Internet. Finally, write your news story with the answers to your questions. Make sure to use the 5 Ws and H (Who, What, When Where, Why and How) in the first paragraph.

■ **Where do the candidates stand on the issues?**

Using newspaper articles and online resources, create a guide showing where the candidates stand on important issues such as: the war in Iraq, the economy, health care and insurance, defense and homeland security, education, immigration, crime, reproductive rights, the environment and global warming, the trade deficit, taxes and federal budget deficit.

## Election Web Sites

Some key Web sites to help you stay informed with reliable information throughout the election.

**VOTE411.org** *The League of Women Voters' nonpartisan resource for election and voting information.*

**c-span.org** *C-SPAN's 2008 Vote Web page; click on "American Politics/ Road to the White House."*

**Factcheck.org** *Nonpartisan site checks the accuracy of political ads and allegations.*

**fec.gov** *Federal Election Commission; official site of the government agency that regulates campaign finance.*

**ap.grolier.com** *Grolier presents the American Presidency.*

**lwv.org** *League of Women Voters*  
**impact.myspace.com**  
*MySpace Impact*

**opensecrets.org** *The Center for Responsive Politics: nonpartisan site on money in U.S. elections.*

**PollingReport.com** *Nonpartisan resource on trends in public opinion.*

Next:

*The General  
Election - Part 2*

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