

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 and will help students of all ages to understand the people, the parties and the issues regarding our election process.

Week Six: Becoming an Informed Citizen

In a democracy, people are the ultimate source of power. Citizens of our country elect the president and vice president, who run the executive branch of government. They also choose senators and representatives in Congress, who make the laws. But with the power to elect the country's leaders comes responsibility. To do the best possible job with their voting power, citizens need to find out about the candidates and issues before they mark their ballots.

That's not always an easy task. Voters these days get bombarded with information: pamphlets and flyers; newspaper, radio and TV ads; e-mails, blogs and YouTube videos. To help you sort out this information, and decide for yourself, the League of Women Voters offers a step-by-step guide called How to Pick a Candidate:

Step 1: Make a candidate report card. List the qualities you would want in a candidate (examples: experience, honesty). List the issues you believe are most important (health care, terrorism, education, taxes). Then rate the candidates on their leadership qualities and on how closely their views match yours.

Step 2: Take a good look at campaign information. Does it tell you where the candidate stands on the issues? Does it tell you about the candidate's qualifications? Or is it designed to appeal to your emotions or to accuse the opponent of something?

Step 3: Learn how other people view the candidate. Polls, endorsements and ratings can give you an idea. However, you need to consider: was the organization that did the polling, rating or endorsing an organization you can trust? What questions were asked, and how were they asked?

Step 4: Rate the candidates on how they campaign. Are they open and honest? Do they talk about issues? Or do they just try to stir up your emotions?

Step 5: Examine the candidate's campaign finances. Is the candidate using his or her own money? Getting money from a few rich people? Getting small donations from lots of people? Are political action committees (groups formed to raise and distribute money) playing a big role?

Step 6: Look for reliable sources of information. Check out Web sites run by nonpartisan political organizations such as the League of Women Voters. Consult newspapers, television and radio news programs. Check with the political parties. By going to a variety of sources, you'll have a broader and more reliable perspective on the candidates and issues.

Step 7: Pick a Candidate. Now that you have tools to make an informed choice — DO SOMETHING! Talk to your friends, classmates and co-workers about your favorite candidates. Ask tough questions at meetings, rallies and when a campaign worker rings your doorbell. Write letters, send e-mails or blog — let candidates, newspapers and party leaders know how you feel about issues. If you see unfair campaign practices, speak out.

Learn More:

- Some people say they don't feel like voting because they don't know enough about the candidates and the issues. If someone said that to you, how would you respond?
- What do you think it takes to be a good citizen in a democracy? What are some of the things you could do that would help strengthen your community and promote democracy?

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A Good Citizen

The following ideas about good citizenship are adapted from the book "The State We're In: Washington: Your guide to state, tribal & local government," published by the LWVWA Education Fund.

Voting at election time is a very important part of citizenship — perhaps the most important. But it's not the only part. There are things you can do all year that will help keep your community and American democracy going strong:

- **Be open to new ideas.** To live in an open, democratic society, we have to accept the fact that not everyone thinks alike. Progress often comes from exposure to new ideas.
- **Try to be a person of good character.** Good people make good citizens. Respect yourself, and others.
- **Love to learn.** If you want to make the world a better place, keep learning about it. Knowledge is power.
- **Take part in the life of your community.** Charities, sports leagues, religious groups and after-school clubs can be ways to get involved. They aren't about politics or elections, but they help people form a civilized society, and that helps democracy.
- **Think of the common good, and about individual liberty.** Both are important. Striking the right balance is something we're always working on.
- **Don't waste time hating government.** In a democracy, the government is "us."
- **Keep faith with democracy.** What makes democracy work is that we all believe in it.