How to Pick a Candidate

Presented by the League of Women Voters of Seattle-King County
Step 1: Decide what you are looking for in a candidate.

You want to pick a candidate that you agree with on the issues and that you feel would be a good person for the job.

Both are important.

Your first step in choosing a candidate is to decide what you care about and what character you want in a leader.

It can be useful to create a Candidate Report Card listing your priority issues and the qualities you think are most important in an elected official. Rate the candidates on how closely their views match yours and on their leadership abilities.
## Sample Candidate Report Card

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Qualities</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue:</strong> Transportation</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Issue:</strong> Human Services</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Issue:</strong> Campaign Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Issue:</strong> Taxes and tax structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience &amp; Education</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty &amp; Integrity</td>
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</table>
Step 2: *Take a good look at campaign information*

You may get a lot of impressions and still feel that you get very little real information about the candidates and their views on the issues.

You hear slogans, you recognize the names of famous candidates, and you can see the personalities of those candidates. But does that help you decide who you like for the job?

Candidates use many tools in campaigning for office, such as political ads, direct mail, web sites, and polls. Voters need tools to judge candidates on their positions and qualifications.

*Next: How to evaluate campaign materials*
Evaluating campaign materials:

• **TV and Radio Ads**: Ask yourself some questions. What did you learn about the candidate? Did you find out any details on what the candidate wants to do? Did the candidate tell you anything about qualifications? Or was the ad designed only to appeal to your emotions? Separate the glitter from the substance.

• **Direct Mail**: More and more candidates use direct mail to ask for money or votes. Computers make it easy to send a letter that looks like it’s just for you. Remember that the letter is another way to try to get your vote and try to see what can be learned from it.

• **Pamphlets and Flyers**: The leaflet left under your door may contain good, interesting information or it may be full of half-truths. Read it critically. Does it accuse the opponent of something? Did you get it so close to Election Day that the opponent can’t answer back?

• **Emotional Appeals**: Listen to a candidate’s statements and arguments. Then decide if they are targeted for your emotions alone. Sometimes the words and pictures used are designed to
Step 3: Learn how others view the candidate.

Poll results are a favorite news story these days. People are asked who they support and sometimes why they support a particular candidate. Polls will tell you who is leading at a certain point in the campaign. Candidates like to know who’s leading because it can increase support and contributions from people who want to be on the winning team.

*Before you believe everything in a poll, ask these questions:*

- **Who paid for the poll?** Did they give you all the answers? When parties and candidates pay for polls, they can control what results they give. They may not publish any information that may be bad for them.

- **Was the poll affected by an important event?** When people see a lot of news stories on an event such as a military crisis or a political scandal, their opinions may change.
Evaluating polls, continued..

- **What questions were asked? Were they fair?** You can easily spot really biased questions that produce a resounding Yes or No. Also look for the leading questions that push you to a certain answer or leave no room for a Yes, if... or No, but...

- **Who was interviewed?** How were people picked? Were people chosen at random? Did the poll include all parts of the country? If not, the results may tell you how a small group feels but nothing about the total population.

- **How many people were interviewed?** No matter how well a poll is done, there is always a margin of error. The smaller the number of people, the more chance that there are mistakes.

- **How many “Undecideds”?** Remember, once the “undecideds” make up their minds, the results could change dramatically.

- **How long ago?** Even the best polls are just a snapshot in time. People may change their minds in a day, a week, or a month, especially as new things happen or they learn more. Look for polls and compare the new poll with past ones, and try to spot trends.
Evaluating “Report Cards” from interest groups:

• **Be smart about how you use group ratings**: Endorsements provide clues to the importance a candidate places on an issue. Some organizations representing special interest groups (business, the environment, labor, older Americans, etc.) go through people’s votes on bills and rate them on how closely they match one group’s point of view. These ratings can be helpful, but they can be misleading. Never take them as the final word.

• **Check the organization’s reputation. Can it be trusted?**

• **What is the group’s bias? Which issues are important to its members?** Are they the same ones you care about? What one group might label as a vote for wasteful spending, another might see as a vote in support for an important project.

• **What votes were included in the ratings?** Sometimes, for instance, the vote that really tells you how the person thinks is on an amendment, not on the main bill. Do the group’s choices and explanations make sense?
Step 4: Rate the candidates on how they campaign

You can tell a lot about a candidate by the way the campaign is run. We deserve open, honest campaigns that tell us about what the candidate wants to do. *We shouldn’t put up with unfair campaigns.*

**Does the candidate answer questions?**
Is the candidate willing to debate with opponents? Does the candidate appear in person or send a “stand-in?”

**Does the candidate campaign fairly?**
Here are some ideas that help you identify an unfair campaign:

- Name-calling
- Spreading Rumours
- Loaded Statements
- Catchwords
Does the candidate campaign fairly?

**Name-calling:** A candidate might call an opponent “wishy-washy” or “two-faced” when he or she really is just showing that it’s OK to listen to both sides and to change your mind. Don’t listen to attacks on a candidate’s family, ethnicity, gender, race or personal characteristics that don’t have anything to do with how the candidate will perform in office.

**Spreading rumors:** Watch for tricky statements such as, “Although everyone says my opponent is a crook, I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing.” These unfair hints can sway an election long before a fair campaign investigation can stop them.

**Loaded Statements:** “I oppose wasteful spending” doesn’t say much - and it makes it seem like the candidate’s opponent is in favor of “wasteful spending”. A candidate should say which spending should be cut and which spending is necessary, and why.

**Catchwords:** Beware of empty phrases such as “law and order” ... “The American Way,” that are designed to trigger a knee-jerk, emotional reaction without saying much.
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. Was it really possible for the candidate to solve the problem? Has there been time to tackle the problem?

• **Promising the sky:**
  Be realistic. Voters shouldn’t expect miracles and candidates shouldn’t promise them.

• **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. Watch out for candidates who talk about benefits and never mention costs or how the nuts and bolts of a proposal work.
Step 5:

Examine the candidate’s campaign finances.

Where do the candidates get the money to pay for their campaigns?

- Use their own money
- Get money from a few wealthy people
- Get money from many people giving small amounts
- Get money from Political Action Committees*

*PACs, as they are known, are groups formed to raise and distribute money to candidates and issues.

Many types of information about money given to campaigns must be reported to the government and are watched by the press. Will people who are elected vote to support the people who gave them money? You may hear something like, “We all know Smith is backed by big money interests,” 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 views on all the issues. *Judge the candidate’s own words and deeds.*
You can get information about campaign contributions:

Federal Election Commission
Toll free: 1 (800) 424-9530
www.fec.gov

State Public Disclosure Commission
(360) 753-1111
Toll free: 1 (877) 601-2828
www.pdc.wa.gov
Step 6:

Where can you find the information you need?

You want to make the right decision, but sometimes it’s hard to quickly and easily find the information you want.

- Read your local newspaper.
- Listen to the news on television or radio.
- Talk to your friends about the election.
- Call the political parties.
- Gather literature from candidates and interest groups.
- Check the League of Women Voters Web site: www.Vote411.org
Vote 411, a project of the League of Women Voters, provides information on voting, elections, and candidates in all races, in all counties in Washington State.
Enter your address for your personalized ballot (or enter a friend’s address):
You will see a voting alert with current election information, and a green bar to click for personalized information on candidates and issues:
You can choose to see a list of your voting districts by clicking “Show Districts”, or see your personalized ballot for the next election by clicking “Find My Information”:
This is what you will see under “Show Districts” - a list of your voting districts:
### Upcoming Debates and Forums

- Whatcom County Council Candidate Forum
  - 6:30 pm
- Bellingham School Board Candidates and Ballot Issue Forum
  - 9:30 am
- Bellingham City Council and Port of Bellingham Commissioners Forum
  - 6:30 pm

- View Entire Event Calendar
- View Event List

### State Voter Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Voter Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

### Your Address

- Street: 1020 10th Ave
- City: Seattle
- State: Washington
- Zip: 98112

- Change your address

### Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Selected District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Lower House District</td>
<td>House District 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congressional Districts 2010</td>
<td>Congressional District 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counties</td>
<td>King</td>
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<td>King County Council</td>
<td>King County Council District 2</td>
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<td>King County District Courts</td>
<td>West</td>
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<td>Seattle</td>
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<td>King County Cities</td>
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<td>King Seattle Port District</td>
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<td>WA EMS Districts</td>
<td>KING 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>King County School Districts</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Update your address and click save.
And if you choose “Find My Information” you will see:
Well, If you click “Find my Information” today: ERROR!
However, On September 24th, you will see:
A menu of all the candidates for your voting districts will display!

(this happens to be New York City Mayor, so we don’t give an appearance of favoritism in choosing local candidates)
Choose candidates to compare - you can go back and forth and look at different candidates, but only two at a time will display.
The two candidates you have chosen will appear on your voter guide screen:
...And the two candidates’ information will display side-by-side:
You select your preferred candidate on the screen by clicking the box:
And your choice is saved on your printable sample ballot:
Choose candidates for as many races as you wish, all or just some, and save your choices by clicking “Finish”: 
After you save your sample ballot, you can send your choices to a text message or e-mail, and share them on social media, such as Facebook!
Step 7: *Pick a candidate*

Now that you have the tools to make an informed choice - DO SOMETHING!

- Back the candidates you believe in.
- Talk to your friends and co-workers about “your” candidate.
- Don’t be afraid to ask tough questions at candidate meetings, at rallies and when a campaign worker rings your doorbell.
- Call TV and radio stations and newspapers to praise or criticize campaign spots.
- Be a letter writer. Tell candidates, newspapers and party leaders how you feel about the issues.
- Don’t tolerate unfair campaign practices.
- Call the League of Women Voters in your area to find out how to get involved and make a difference.

Then, **VOTE** for the candidate of your choice!
...and remember...