

Voter Services News

Mike Hall, a columnist for the Topeka Capital Journal, recently identified three reliable sources where one can fact-check information. While these sites don't solely focus on campaign statements, they may prove useful in the next few months, in particular: PolitiFact.com, Snopes.com, and FactCheck.org. We certainly suggest that you do your homework during the campaign and take care before you reach a conclusion about any issue or candidate. With the power to vote comes the duty to cast that vote responsibly.

Several years ago, the US League of Women Voters published a blog entitled "How to Judge a Candidate." We think a review of that blog is in order as we enter high campaign season. The advice remains good. Now that the candidates have been chosen it is up to each of us to do our homework and prepare for the General Election. Below is our excerpt of the League's blog. The entire blog can be accessed [here](#).

STEP 1: Decide what you are looking for in 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. When you consider issues, think about community or national problems that you want people in government to address. When you consider leadership qualities, think about the characteristics you want in an effective leader. Do you look for intelligence, honesty, an ability to communicate? What else?

STEP 2: Find out about the candidates.

Find out which candidates are running in the race you are following by using the League's online election resource VOTE411.org.

Find out all the eligible candidates that will appear on the ballot. Be sure to include minor party and/or independent candidates.

(LWVTSC Note: Kansans will be able to see a PDF of their actual ballot soon at the Kansas Secretary of State's site, [Voter View](#).)

STEP 3: Gather materials about the candidates.

Put together information about the candidates. Sources of information you may choose to review include:

- VOTE411.org
- campaign literature
- mass mailings sent to selected voters asking for support and funds
- newspaper, television, and radio reports
- radio and television ads
- candidates' speeches
- candidate debates (information on League-hosted debates is available on VOTE411.org)

For incumbents, a look at their voting records on issues that you have listed as important can tell you the candidates' positions on those issues.

STEP 4: Evaluate candidates' stands on issues.

As you read the materials you collect, keep a journal. Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about the candidates' stands on issues? Record what you have learned about their stands on your priority issues from each source.

STEP 5: Learn about the candidates' leadership abilities.

Here are some ways to read between the lines as you evaluate the candidates' leadership qualities:

- Look at the candidates' background and their experience. How prepared are they for the job?
- Observe the candidates' campaigns. Do they give speeches to different groups – even those groups that may disagree with the candidates' views on issues? Do they accept invitations to debate? Do the campaigns emphasize media events, where the candidates can be seen but not heard? (For instance, a candidate is seen cutting ribbons to open new bridges rather than talking about transportation.)
- Review the campaign materials. As you read the materials and watch the campaign develop, add to your journal information that provides insights into candidates' personalities and leadership qualities. For example, do campaign materials emphasize issues or image? Are they accurate?

STEP 6: Learn how other people view the candidate.

Learn what other people think about the candidates. Their opinions can help clarify your own views, but do not discount your own informed judgments. You may be the most careful observer of all!

- Seek the opinions of others in your community who keep track of political campaigns. Interview three people (not family members), such as a librarian, store owner, neighbor, or politically active volunteer, to find out which candidate they support and why. Learn what has shaped their political opinions. Was it an event? An idea or program proposed by a candidate? A particular issue about which they feel strongly? A long-standing party loyalty?
- Learn about endorsements. This is a way for interest groups and organizations to give a “stamp of approval” to a candidate. Endorsements provide clues to the issues a candidate supports. Get a list of endorsements from each of the candidates' headquarters. Find out what these groups stand for and find out why they are endorsing this candidate.
- Look into campaign contributions. Where do the candidates get the funds to finance their campaigns? Do they use their own money or raise funds from a few wealthy donors, from many small contributors 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 reported to the government and are watched by the press. Check the newspaper for stories on campaign finance or go online to Opensecrets.org. How might these campaign contributions affect the candidates' conduct in office? You might also want to analyze an incumbent's voting record on issues important to PACs and other campaign contributors.
- Throughout the campaign, opinion polls will be taken by a variety of groups to evaluate public support for the different candidates. As you read the polls, ask these questions: Who sponsored the poll? Was the poll produced by a trusted and independent group? Were all the figures released, even unfavorable data? What kinds of questions were asked? Were they slanted or unbiased? How were respondents selected – randomly or in

such a way to include all segments of the population? How many people were included in the poll sample?

STEP 7: Sorting it all out.

Ask yourself these final questions:

- Which candidate's views on the issues do I agree with the most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidate demonstrated the most knowledge on the issues?
- Which candidate has the leadership qualities I am looking for?

Is the choice clear? If so, pick a candidate.

Through all these steps, see through distortion techniques

- *Name calling/Appeals to prejudice:* These are attacks on an opponent based on characteristics that will not affect performance in office. Accusations such as, "My opponent is arrogant and full of hot air," do not give any real information about the candidate. Reference to race, ethnicity or marital status can be subtly used to instill prejudice.
- *Rumor mongering:* These include statements such as, "Everyone says my opponent is a crook, but I have no personal knowledge of any wrongdoing," which imply (but do not state) that the opponent is guilty.
- *Guilt by associations:* These are statements such as, "We all know Candidate B is backed by big money interest," that attack candidates because of their supporters rather than because of their stands on the issues.
- *Catchwords:* These are phrases such as "Law and Order" or "un-American" designed to trigger a knee-jerk emotional reaction rather than to inform.
- *Passing the blame:* These are instances in which a candidate denies responsibility for an action or blames an opponent for things over which they had no control.
- *Promising the sky:* These are unrealistic promises that no elected official could fulfill.
- *Evading real issues:* These include instances in which candidates may avoid answering direct questions, offer only vague solutions, or talk about the benefits of proposed programs but never get specific about possible problems or costs.

Evaluate candidates' use of television

Television is dependent on good pictures and timely events to tug at your emotions and keep your interest. As you watch news coverage of campaigns, be aware of staged events (also known as photo opportunities) and try to find out what the candidate is saying about the issues.

When you watch political ads, you need to be aware of how the medium influences your reactions. Ask yourself some questions as you watch. Did you find out anything about issues or qualifications or was the ad designed only to affect your attitude or feelings about a candidate? How important were the script, setting and music?

Stay safe and well,
Leslie Prentice and Mary Galligan
Voter Services Co-chairs