



7 Steps to an Informed Vote

By Karyn Edison

Vice Chair, Lee County Democratic Party

Every election deserves an informed voter. These short guides walk you through seven important factors to consider when evaluating candidates, helping you separate campaign rhetoric from the information that matters most.

#1: Personal Values and Beliefs

This is probably ground zero when it comes to evaluating which candidates you feel deserve your vote. It's the most basic question you can ask yourself in politics: does this candidate believe what I believe in? Are their values my values? Will they vote, and lead, the way I want to be represented? These are arguably the most important questions to ask yourself before voting.

Oftentimes, finding the answer isn't as easy as you might think. Thorough research, including going through a candidate's policy positions or platform on their campaign website, for example, would be a good place to get a sense of what their values are and what sort of causes they would champion in office.

What you shouldn't do is let media reports paint a picture of any candidate for you. As we're all aware, political media can have perverse incentives to stir up viewership based on sensationalism and news trends—it's much better to do your own research into what the candidate stands for, what their voting record might be, what their background is, and what their positions on several issues are. Media coverage alone won't do this for you—or will intentionally present an extremely slanted and/or biased view of them—so we implore you to look into the background of each candidate you might consider voting for.

#2: Assessing Policy Positions and Proposals

Hand in hand with personal values is assessing the policy positions and proposals from any candidate you might vote for, i.e., how will this candidate put their values into action? It's one thing to profess support for combating climate change, for example, but if the candidate has no other plans or proposals for turning that position into actionable

policy—or no clear track record of related accomplishments in their past—that's definitely something to take into consideration as well.

In line with assessing policy positions and proposals is also the candidate's plan to deal with the realpolitik of being in office. Sure, a given candidate may express support for lowering carbon emissions to ease climate change, but do they have a plan of attack for getting such provisions written into law? Do they seem like they have the relationships or energy to persuade their fellow officeholders to support them in their policy ambitions? These things matter as well—although it can be difficult to assess ahead of time how effective a given politician will be once in office. There are many, many cases of candidates over-promising and under-delivering, a problem that no doubt feeds into the rampant polarization and low-approval ratings across the board in the U.S. Congress.

#3: Evaluating Campaign Conduct and Integrity

Alongside policy proposals and value statements, getting a clear idea of each candidate's personal character and integrity is a huge factor when your vote is on the line as well. Factors such as how they conducted their campaign—positive, negative, whether they depend on dark money fundraising, etc.—are hugely important to consider if this is the person you want representing you in public office.

After all, the last thing any voters want is to unknowingly, or unwittingly, elect into office yet another corrupt politician looking out for themselves over the interests of their constituents. Keep a close eye on any political scandals this candidate may be involved in, and do enough research to determine if the scandals are truly indicative of the politician's character, or if the scandals are blown out of proportion by a bloodthirsty political media ecosystem. Like we said before, it can sometimes be hard to tell what's legitimately true and what gets clicks.

#4: Experience, Qualifications, and Voting Record

Three major factors to take into account when evaluating candidates are their experience, qualifications, and, if they are an incumbent or have held elected office before, what their voting record was. For some offices, direct political experience isn't really necessary – whether it's a local school board seat or even U.S. Congressperson. What truly matters is the candidate's past experience in any field, and how that candidate is able to sell their experience as a benefit for their campaign. Look no further than Donald Trump, who successively spun his not-so-successful career as a businessman into the Presidency of the United States, despite never having held public office before.

Hand in hand with experience is their qualifications, which, though related, are definitely

distinct considerations. Based on this candidate's past, do you think they would perform well in office? Is their prior experience transferable to the set they are running for? If they do seem qualified, but don't share your values or policy positions, then perhaps they aren't actually "qualified" to earn your vote whatsoever. Deciding which candidate to vote for is not simply a checklist, and many candidates will have some characteristics that bolster their position and some that hold them back. It's up to each voter to decide which facets are most important, and which facets can be overlooked.

#5: Exploring Funding Sources and Campaign Finance

This is a big one. Understanding how each candidate is funding their campaign will reveal a lot about their true priorities, allegiances, and ultimately, who they consider their true constituents to be. If Candidate A says they want to combat climate change and improve healthcare access but is receiving a boatload of dark money fundraising from special interest groups like Big Oil or Big Pharma, that's a major red flag.

After all, candidates can say whatever they want—it's called lip service for a reason—but if the stability and success of their campaign depends on pleasing big money funders, it doesn't matter what they say in public at all. No politician will be able to enact their agenda if they never make it to public office to begin with, and for far too many politicians, getting into office means accepting money from major industries who will only fund them on the explicit promise to protect their bottom line once they are in office.

Candidates who don't accept dark money and Super PAC fundraising, and instead rely on small donations from actual voters, will do a much better job of actually representing the interests of their voters because their campaign success depends on the support of actual voters, not major industries and special interest groups. Lip service is just that – lip service. In politics, like in most aspects of American society, for better or worse, money talks.

#6: Electability & Viability

This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of evaluating a political candidate: can they actually win? You might evaluate a candidate and discover they share your values, have respectable experience, and in general have earned your trust. However, this candidate is only polling at 7%. Sure, you could vote your conscience and vote for this person and feel good about having your voice heard by democracy. But what if this vote meant that a far, far worse candidate would actually win?

Many voters will consider voting for "the lesser of two evils" in an election not to support the candidate they believe in the most, but to deny a victory to the candidate they feel would be the most destructive. Let's say you really want Candidate A, but they are only garnering 7% of the vote. Candidate B represents everything you're against, and they're

polling at 43%. Then there's Candidate C, who isn't nearly as aligned to your personal values as Candidate A but is more trustworthy and far less destructive than Candidate B, and they are also polling at 43%. If electability is an important factor for you, you might consider voting for Candidate B, even though they aren't your preferred candidate, because they have a legitimate shot of winning and a legitimate shot of denying a victory for Candidate B.

What's important to note, however, is that this circumstance only rears its head during first-past-the-post voting (basically, a system in which whoever gets the most votes wins). In alternate voting systems, such as ranked choice voting, such game theory considerations are built into the mechanism of ranking your preferences instead of casting a solitary vote. So, yes, this is a consideration for the here and now, but many constituencies are starting to adopt ranked-choice voting specifically to avoid "strategic voting" and to capture a more accurate reflection of the public's preferences. We did a whole breakdown comparing different voting systems here, and it's worth a read.

#7: Taking Note of Endorsements and Affiliations

Finally, major endorsements, whether from other elected officials, union leaders, major organizers, or public figures, may play a role in helping you decide which candidate should earn your vote. Most candidates will have their campaign endorsements and affiliations listed on their campaign websites, and they are worth checking out. If you're in a union or you value one particular public figure's opinion, their endorsement of a given candidate might be enough to push you over the edge into supporting them. The reverse applies as well: if a candidate you may like has garnered zero serious endorsements from public figures and major organizations, that could be a red flag when considering their campaign's viability, and whether this candidate actually has what it takes to win the election.