

# How to Judge a Candidate

## To the student:

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you judge candidates for public office. Your teacher will give you specific assignments from the material. Before you begin, read through all the steps and familiarize yourself with what you will be doing. As you do the assignments, you will keep notes in a journal and will fill out the Candidate Report Card on page 4.

## To the teacher:

This pamphlet has been designed so that you may select from among the suggested activities and assign those most appropriate for your class and for the time available. If time is short, you may want to gather the information and materials described in Steps 2 and 3 and assign students only selected activities. Consider dividing the class into groups and

assigning different activities to different students. Note that this pamphlet was written for use in a general election, although most activities are also applicable to a primary election. Consider using **How to Watch a Debate** also available from the League of Women Voters (see order information on page 4) as an additional resource.

**E**lections present voters with important choices. Whether it is a local race that will affect your community or a national race that could change the direction of the country, it is a time to consider the issues which you care about and decide which candidate you support. Even if you are under 18 and not yet eligible to vote, election campaigns

offer an excellent way to learn about the people and issues that affect your future.

But how do voters go about comparing and then judging the candidates? All too often, slogans, name recognition and personality are all that come through in campaign materials. As television has come to dominate polit-

ical campaigns, it has become difficult to move beyond a candidate's image to the substance of a campaign.

However, it is possible to move beyond style to substance. The seven steps outlined in this brochure are designed to help you judge a candidate.

## 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. Both are important. Your first step in picking a candidate is to decide the issues *you* care about and the qualities *you* want in a leader.

When you consider issues, think about community or national problems that you want people in government to address. For example, you may be interested in the threat of nuclear war, government funding for student loans or teenage unemployment. Those are issues.

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?

As a class, discuss the important issues in this election and the leadership qualities you look for in a candidate. Select from the class list those issues and qualities that are most important to *you* in this campaign. Record them on the "Candidate Report Card" on page 4.

## STEP 2:

### Find out about the candidates.

Pick a campaign to study. It can be any type of race: for a national office (such as president, senator, or representative), for a state race (such as governor), or for a local race (such as city council member or school board member). It will probably be easier to follow a visible race that is hotly contested or that involves a major office. Work alone or with a group of students to learn more about the candidates.

First, find out which candidates are running in the race you are following by making a phone call to your local

elections board, political party headquarters, or a political reporter on your local newspaper. Or look in the *Voter's Guide* published by your local League of Women Voters. Find out *all* of the candidates who are eligible to appear on the ballot. Be sure to include minor party and/or independent candidates.

## STEP 3:

### Gather materials about the candidates.

Put together a "library" of information about the candidates. Collect any information you can find on the candidates. Call campaign headquarters and watch the press. Sources of information from which you may choose include:

- Campaign literature
- Direct mail letters (mass mailings sent to selected voters asking for support and funds)



- Press reports (newspaper clippings and television and radio reports)
- Radio and television ads (call campaign headquarters and find out when ads are aired, or ask if you can view them at headquarters)
- Candidates' speeches
- Candidate debates

In a local race, interviews with the candidates can be helpful. 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. Fill in the Candidate Report Card as you gather new information about the candidates.

## **STEP 5:** **Learn about the candidates' leadership abilities.**

Deciding if a candidate will be a good leader is difficult. How can you know if someone will be honest, open or able to act under pressure if elected to office? Here are some ways to read between the lines as you evaluate the candidates' leadership qualities.

1. Look at the candidates' background and their experience. How well prepared are they for the job?

2. Observe the candidates' campaigns. Do they accept speaking engagements before different groups — even those groups that might not be sympathetic? 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.)

3. 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 just image? Are they accurate? Add this information to the Candidate Report Card.

## **STEP 6:** **Learn how other people view the candidate.**

Now that you have accumulated information from campaigns and other sources, you will want to 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!

1. Seek the opinions of others in your community who keep track of political campaigns. Interview three people (not family members), such as a shopkeeper, 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?

2. 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. For instance, a candidate endorsed by the Sierra Club (an environmental organization) will be in favor of legislation that protects the environment. A candidate endorsed by the National Rifle Association would be opposed to gun control laws. 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.

3. 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. 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.

4. Throughout the campaign, opinion polls will be taken by a variety of groups to evaluate public support for the different candidates. Polls reveal who is leading at a certain point in the race. This information can be crucial for a candidate because it can increase support and contributions from people who want to be on the winning team. As you read the polls, ask these questions: Who sponsored the poll? Were all the figures released? (When parties and candidates pay for polls, they may not publish 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?



## See through distortion techniques

All candidates are trying to sell themselves to voters. Sometimes their language is so skillfully crafted that they distort the truth in ways that are difficult for even the most careful observer to detect. Here are examples of distortion techniques that you should watch for as you review candidates' campaign materials.

### Common 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. References to race, eth-

nicity 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 association:*

These are statements such as, "We all know Candidate B is backed by big money interests," 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-Ameri-

can" that are 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 he or she had no control.

- *Promising the sky:*

These are unrealistic promises that no one 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

More and more, people tune in to television for their main source of information. Television is a visual medium dependent on good pictures and timely events to tug at your emotions and keep your interest. Candidates are aware of the potential power of television and try to use it to their advantage. For instance, in a newscast, the picture you see of a crowd with

banners and balloons cheering for a candidate may have been staged by a media advisor whose job is to make the candidate look good on television. 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.

The same warning applies to televised political advertise-

ments. 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?

## STEP 7: Sorting it all out.

Review the information in your *Candidate Report Card* and compare all the

candidates. Ask yourself these final questions:

- Which candidate's views on the issues do you agree with the most?
- Who ran the fairest campaign?
- Which candidate demonstrated the

most knowledge on the issues?

- Which candidate has the leadership qualities you are looking for?

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

# Candidate Report Card

| ISSUES<br>My priority issues | My position                                      | Candidate A | Candidate B | Candidate C |
|------------------------------|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Example:<br>student aid      | <i>I am for government-sponsored student aid</i> |             |             |             |
| 1.                           |  |             |             |             |
| 2.                           |  |             |             |             |
| 3.                           |  |             |             |             |
| 4.                           |  |             |             |             |

| LEADERSHIP QUALITIES             | I want... | Candidate A | Candidate B | Candidate C |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Example:<br>honesty, flexibility |           |             |             |             |
| 1.                               |           |             |             |             |
| 2.                               |           |             |             |             |
| 3.                               |           |             |             |             |
| 4.                               |           |             |             |             |

**My Choice:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Now that you have thought through your choices, DO SOMETHING!

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Back the candidates you believe in.                                | and when a campaign worker rings your doorbell.                              | newspapers and party leaders how you feel about the issues.                            |
| 2. Talk to your friends and classmates about "your" candidate.        | 4. Call television and radio stations to praise or criticize campaign spots. | 6. Volunteer to work on a campaign.  |
| 3. Don't be afraid to ask questions at candidate meetings, at rallies | 5. Be a letter writer. Tell candidates,                                      | 7. When you turn 18, register to vote. Then, on election day go to the polls and vote! |

### Credits:

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*Researched and written by Kara McCollum and Deborah Goldman, LWVEF*

### Order from:

*League of Women Voters of the United States, 1730 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202) 429-1965. Pub. #818, 75¢ (50¢ for members). Quantity discounts available.*

*The LWVEF companion pamphlets **How to Watch a Debate** (Pub. #819, 75¢/50¢ for members) and **Pick a Candidate** (Pub. #259, 10/\$1.50 minimum order) are also available from the League of Women Voters at the above address.*



# How to Watch a Debate

## To the Teacher and Students:

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you learn how to watch political candidate debates. The “Rate the Debate” questions on page 3 can be used for class discus-

sion and as guidelines as you watch a debate. The suggested activities on page 4 are provided for class assignments by the teacher. Teachers should consider

using **How to Judge a Candidate** also available from the League of Women Voters (see order information on back page) as an additional resource.

In 1984, an estimated 85 million Americans watched the televised debates between presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Nine out of every ten American voters say they have watched a candidate debate some time in the past. These include debates among candidates for all levels of public office, from city council to the U.S. Senate to the presidency. No other political events — in fact, few other television programs — produce such large audiences. Why do people watch debates?

Clearly, there is a horse-race quality to a candidate debate; people want to know who will “win” when the stakes are so high and the political atmosphere so intense. But there is more. Before voters go to the polls, they want to know where candidates stand on the issues, what leadership qualities the candidates possess, how they react under pressure, even what they look like. Voters want to comparison shop and to see the candidates meet head-on and face-to-face.

Think of other ways we learn about candidates. The 60-second spot on TV is produced by a media advisor,

the letter seeking contributions is written by a professional fundraiser, and news reports are filtered through the eyes of reporters. Compared to these, the candidate debate provides a direct opportunity to hear candidates speak for themselves, unrehearsed, without a prepared speech.

Still, viewers need to watch debates with a careful eye. Television can emphasize image over substance. Good debaters are not necessarily better leaders. This pamphlet provides background information and poses questions to help you as you watch candidate debates.

## Candidate debates: A behind the scenes look

At first glance, the purpose of a debate seems obvious — to provide voters with the information they need to make an intelligent choice at the polls. Debates also help to get the public interested in an election and to educate voters about the issues.

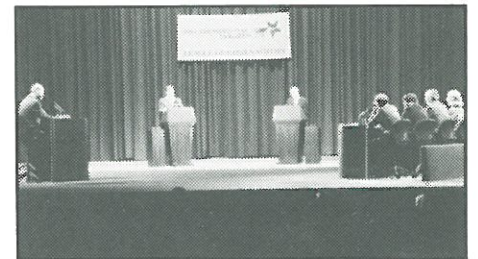
But those directly involved in debates may have other goals. For candidates, it is to get elected. Candidates weigh every debate decision — whether to debate, what format is best, even what curtain colors and camera angles they want — with one question: “Will it help me win?” Television broadcasters who air the debate want to attract an audience with a lively show and a hot race. The debate that gets on the air is the result of delicate juggling of all these goals.

The juggling takes place in negotiating sessions between the debate

sponsor, the candidates, and, in some cases, the broadcaster. Negotiations focus on such issues as the number, date, site and format for the debate. These negotiations often are long and difficult, and they may involve what seem to be small details. The negotiations for the presidential and vice-presidential debates in 1984, for example, went on for an intense three-week period before the debate schedule finally was set. Weeks later, conflicts arose over such issues as the color of the backdrop curtain and the placement of furniture on stage. Though minor, each dispute could have led one candidate or the other to back out of the debate at the last minute.

### Format

The negotiations about format — the actual structure of the debate — are usually the most intense. A candidate debate can use any format that puts candidates face-to-face stating their

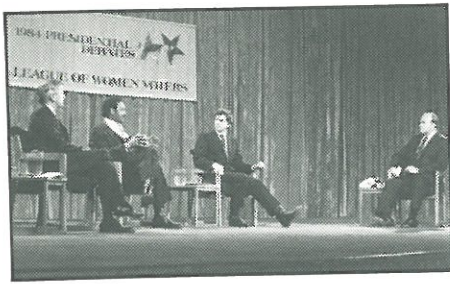


Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale square off in the 1984 presidential debates.

views and responding to their opponents. Using this definition, what methods can you think of to structure debates?

Candidates tend to prefer safe formats that protect them from direct confrontation. The “*modified press conference*,” used in the 1984 Reagan-Mondale debates, is an example of this format in which a journalist poses a question, a candidate has several minutes to respond, the journalist poses a follow-up ques-





Three contenders for the Democratic nomination for president — Walter Mondale, Jesse Jackson, and Gary Hart — respond to questions posed by moderator Sander Vanocur in a 1984 presidential primary debate.

tion, and the same candidate responds. The next candidate goes through the same questioning process and then each has a chance to rebut, or refute, the opponent. This format guarantees each candidate equal time and takes advantage of the knowledge of a number of journalists. However, it provides little opportunity to challenge a candidate who is dodging a question and often allows the press to set the agenda for the debate; sometimes issues of most concern to the public and to the candidates are missed in the process.

Contrast the above format with the much less structured “single moderator format” used in the 1984 Democratic primary debates. A single moderator posed questions to the candidates and was free to follow up immediately if a candidate ducked the question or responded with an answer that was too general. Candidates were given time to ask questions of each other. This format usually results in a much livelier interaction between candidates and tends to highlight differences in the candidates’ stands on the issues. However, it requires a skilled, well-informed moderator who is able to make sure all candidates get equal opportunity to present their views.

In some debates, audience questions are used, either live or prescreened. Formal opening and/or closing statements by the candidates often are included. Sometimes, several formats are combined in one debate. As you watch debates, consider the

strengths and weaknesses of the format, and keep in mind that the format selected probably reflects a compromise reached by the candidates, the debate sponsor and possibly the broadcaster.

### Candidate participation

As you watch a debate, note who is and who is not included. Are minor party and/or independent candidates involved? Deciding whom to include in a debate is not always easy or obvious for debate sponsors. Some debate sponsors choose to include only major candidates in order to use the brief time available to give voters an opportunity to compare candidates with a realistic chance of winning. Other sponsors prefer to open the platform to all legally qualified candidates, providing voters with an opportunity to hear all candidates’

points of view. Which position do you think is most informative to voters?

Either way poses potential problems. In 1980, for example, the League of Women Voters Education Fund announced it would include in its presidential debates all candidates receiving more than 15 percent support in national nonpartisan public opinion polls. Independent candidate John Anderson met that criterion, and the League invited him to participate in the first presidential debate. The Democratic contender, President Jimmy Carter, promptly pulled out. Later, when Anderson’s support dipped below the League-established 15 percent criterion, he was not invited for the second debate. Carter then agreed to take the stage opposite Republican candidate Ronald Reagan.

## Impact of debates

Most scholars agree that debates rarely cause a dramatic change in the course of an election. They seldom make a winner out of a long-shot nor can they destroy a candidate who is far ahead in the polls. In fact, studies of the impact of presidential debates show that debates tend to confirm the choices people have already made. According to these studies, even if a candidate makes a major mistake or says something supporters do not like during a debate, most supporters adjust their views in order to remain loyal to the original candidate.

This is not to say that debates do not shape voters’ opinions. In fact, they have the greatest impact on undecided voters. Watching a debate helps an uncommitted voter decide how to cast a ballot on election day.

In addition, studies show that debates influence voters in other important ways. Debates stimulate interest in the election and inform the public about the issues involved in the campaign as well as the candidates’ posi-

tions on those issues. They put candidates on the record, so they can be held accountable once in office. They help rally a candidate’s supporters to get involved in the campaign and to vote. And finally, they provide a great deal of information about the personalities of the candidates.

In sum, candidate debates can play a vital role in our democracy. In a country in which only about half of all eligible voters cast their ballots in the 1984 presidential elections, the role that televised debates play in stimulating and educating voters is especially important.

Debates, though, will remain only as good as the public wants them to be. Because many candidates want safe debates — or all too often, no debates at all — it is up to the public to persuade candidates to debate and to accept better, more challenging formats. And then, it is up to the debate audience to evaluate the candidates — to differentiate between style and substance — and to make informed choices at the polls.



## Rate the debate

**Y**ou will get more out of watching a debate if you are well prepared. Get ready by following press reports on the candidates. Knowing their campaign positions ahead of time and knowing something about the issues that are likely to come up in the debate will help you to understand the questions and answers and to evaluate the candidates' performance. It also is helpful to get some background on the debate sponsor and follow any campaign conflicts over the debate itself.

### Rate the debate format

A good format should be interesting and fair, should provide information about the candidates' views on the issues and should help you judge the candidates' leadership qualities. In evaluating the debate format, consider:

1. Does it give all candidates equal opportunity to speak and to respond to opponents?
2. Does it hold your interest? Does it allow the differences between the candidates to surface?
3. Does it make it easy for the candidates to talk about the issues? Does it allow the candidates to state their views clearly? Does it allow the candidates to be pinned down?
4. Does it give you insight into the candidates' personalities and leadership qualities?

### Rate the moderator/panelists

1. Is the moderator in control of the debate?
2. Are the questions fair? Are they equally tough on all candidates?
3. Are the questions clear? Is there enough information so that viewers

understand the meaning of the answers? Are follow-up questions used to help pin down the candidates?

4. Do the questions cover the important issues? Are there any major issues that are not mentioned?
5. Does the moderator or do any of the panelists talk too much?
6. Does the moderator allow each candidate the same amount of time to talk?

### Rate the candidates

Most of your attention during a debate centers on the candidates' performance, and rightly so. But as you watch, be aware of your reactions both to the substance of the candidates' remarks and to the visual images they convey. Those images can be powerful. For example, two revealing polls were taken after the 1960 debates between John Kennedy, who came across as youthful and energetic, and Richard Nixon, who looked tired and older. A majority of television viewers judged Kennedy the debate winner, but a poll of radio listeners gave the victory to Nixon. Clearly, the power of image can cause voters to overlook the substance of a debate. Therefore, as you evaluate candidates, consider:

#### Image

1. Are you influenced by the age, sex, clothes, posture or other physical characteristics of the candidates? How?
2. What impressions do the candidates convey as the debate progresses? Who appears more relaxed? more sincere? more confident?
3. Who knows how to use television better? Do the candidates look directly at you (into the camera) or elsewhere (at the panelists, live audience, etc.)? Does this affect your overall impression of the candidates?

#### Substance

1. Do the candidates answer or evade the questions?
2. Do the candidates tell you their stands on issues or do they respond with emotional appeals and campaign slogans?
3. Do the candidates give their own views, or do they mostly attack the opponent? Are the attacks personal or directed at the opponent's policies?
4. Are the answers consistent with the candidates' previous positions?
5. Is the candidate well informed? Do the candidates use facts and figures to help you understand or to confuse you?
6. Are the answers realistic or are they just campaign promises?

You may want to read a transcript or view a videotape of the debate to help answer these questions.

### Rate the impact of the debate

Political debates are but one event in a long campaign season. How has the debate influenced the campaign? In evaluating the impact of a debate, consider the following:

1. At what stage in the campaign is the debate taking place?
2. What press coverage, if any, is there of the debate? Does it cover important issues or focus on attention-getting details (mistakes, slogans, etc.)?
3. Did the debate change press coverage of the campaign? Are different issues emphasized?
4. Did the candidates' ratings in the polls change after the debate?
5. Has interest in the campaign changed? How?
6. Have the behavior, policy positions or campaign strategy of either candidate changed? How?



# Suggested activities

## 1. The candidates and the issues

*Before the debate:* On a piece of paper, along the left margin, write down the issues about which you care most. Make a column next to each issue for each candidate. Then, make a column for your own position on each issue listed. If you do not know or you want to hear the various views before forming an opinion, leave it blank.

*During the debate:* As candidates talk about the issues you have listed, fill in their positions in the appropriate column. If you do not understand the candidate's answer, write "don't understand." If the candidate avoids the question, write "avoids question". If the issue is not discussed, leave it blank.

*After the debate:* Make a final column listing your positions on the issues after watching the debate. Evaluate what you learned about the issues from the debate. Have you changed any opinions or made up your mind on any issues? Circle the candidate's positions that are the closest to yours. How helpful was the debate in helping you learn the candidates' stands on the issues?

## 2. The candidates and their leadership qualities

*Before the debate:* On a piece of paper, along the left margin, list the qualities of a good leader. (Examples:

strong, good communicator, good listener, honest, smart, etc.). Next, for each quality, make a column with the name of each candidate in the debate.

*During the debate:* As you watch the debate, note ways in which each candidate does or does not show the leadership qualities you have listed. Your examples should come both from the candidates' statements and from the images they convey.

*After the debate:* Evaluate your list. What impressed you the most: content or image? How was the debate helpful in teaching you about the candidates' leadership qualities? How might it be deceptive? How do your impressions compare with those of others — classmates, parents, media commentators?

## 3. Impact of debates — take your own poll

*Before the debate:* Design a poll to determine your classmates' views (or, as a class project, a sampling of your neighbors' and relatives' views) of the candidates. Include questions about the leadership qualities of the candidates, the candidates' stands on key issues and whom they would vote for if the election were held that day.

*After the debate:* Go back to the same group of people and ask the same questions. How did their answers change, if at all? What impact did the debate have on your sample?

## 4. Impact of debates — interviews

*Before the debate:* Design a set of interview questions to solicit various views of the candidates (their leadership qualities, their stands on issues, whom they would vote for, and so on). Select different kinds of people to interview.

*After the debate:* Interview the same people. Ask who they thought "won" the debate and why. Also ask if they changed their opinion as a result of the debate and what they learned from the debate. Evaluate the responses. What impact did the debate have?

## 5. Participate in a debate

*Attend a debate:* Find out if there will be a live audience at a candidate debate. If so, ask if you can attend. If there will be audience questions, prepare the questions you would like the candidates to address.

*Stage your own mock debate:* Assign all roles to various classmates, including candidates, moderator, etc. You may even want to stage mock negotiating sessions over debate details (format, etc.). Afterwards, be sure to evaluate how your debate went and discuss the different viewpoints of all participants.

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