

III. Candidates, Parties, and Ballot Measures

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What the students do: Use a framework to learn about and evaluate candidates.

[CA History-Social Science Standards](#): 12.2.4

[CMS Promising Approaches](#): 2

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How to Judge a Candidate

Overview

This activity provides students with a framework for learning about and evaluating candidates. Teacher could allow students to choose or assign different candidates running for local, state, or national offices. Students could share what they learn about the candidates with others through a hallway/classroom display of student work, with parents, or could use this activity to prepare for a mock election.

Objectives

The students will be able to:

- Name candidates and the offices they are running for.
- Identify and describe at least two issues the candidate discusses.
- Analyze and evaluate the candidate's stand on the issues.
- State and support their opinions on which candidate(s) should be elected.
- Evaluate the method they used to judge candidates.

Materials/Preparation

Handout: "How to Judge a Candidate"—1 per student

Determine if the students' work will be shared and the criteria you'll use to assess.

Ideas for Using the "How to Judge A Candidate" framework with Students

- A. Use the framework to prepare your students to participate in a mock election. Assign students to work in teams to prepare a "report card" for each of the candidates on the mock election ballot. Assessment criteria might include: thoroughness of research, issue-based arguments supporting or opposing a candidate's position, the student's ability to state and support an opinion on which of the steps in judging a candidate was most valuable and why.
- B. Divide the steps in the framework among different groups of students, having each group complete one of the steps for one candidate. Have each of the groups contribute its work product to creating a "portrait of the candidates" booklet to distribute, bulletin board, hallway, or presentation. Share the portraits with parents, other students, or community groups.

You may want to have the students take a non-partisan, "just the facts" approach to this to create an informational, not opinionated, portrait. You could discuss with students the differences and the purposes of non-partisan vs. endorsement approaches to educating others about candidates and issues.

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How to Judge a Candidate

Elections 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.

The seven steps outlined in the framework below are designed to help you judge a candidate.

1. Decide what you are looking for in a candidate.
2. Find out about the candidates.
3. Gather materials about the candidates.
4. Evaluate candidates' stands on issues.
5. Learn about the candidates' leadership abilities.
6. Learn how other people view the candidate.
7. Sorting it all out.

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 he or she would bring to office. Both are important. Your first step in judging 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 environment, terrorism, 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?

Step 2: Find out about the candidates.

First find out which candidates are running in the race by going to Smart Voter (<http://www.smartvoter.org/index.html>). If Smart Voter is not available for your county, then look in your Sample Ballot mailed to you from your county elections office. Newspapers are another source of information.

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, including campaign Web sites

Nonpartisan online voter information Web sites like Smart Voter

Direct mail letters

Press reports (newspapers, television, and radio)

Radio and television ads

Candidate speeches

Candidate debates.

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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 record. Do the materials give you an overall impression of the candidates? What specific conclusions can you draw about the candidates' stand on issues? Fill in the Candidate Report Card as you gather new information (see end).

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 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?
3. Review the campaign materials. As you read the materials and watch the campaign develop, add to the Candidate Report Card. the information that provides insights into candidates' personalities and leadership qualities. For example, do campaign materials emphasize issues or just images? Are they accurate?

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 to 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 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. Get a list of endorsements from each 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? 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?

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- 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. As you read the polls, ask these questions: Who sponsored the poll? Were all the figures released? What kinds of questions were asked? Were they slanted or unbiased? How were respondents selected – randomly or in a way that included all segments of the population? How many people were included in the poll sample?

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 view 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.

Evaluate candidates' use of television

More and more, people tune in to televisions 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 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 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 media 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?

Seeing 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 some 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. References 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 association: These are statements such as, "We all know Candidate B is backed by big money interest," that attack candidates because of their support rather than because of their stands on the issues.

Catchwords: These are phrases such as "Law and Order" or "un-American" 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.

Prepare a Candidate Report Card

List Issues: Your Priority Issues

List your positions and rank the candidates on how they stand on the issues and your positions

List the Leadership Qualities you want and rank the candidates on those qualities.

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