



A SERVICE OF THE WISCONSIN TAXPAYERS ALLIANCE

2012 Elections: Your Vote Counts!

Your Election Homework

The lead-up to elections gives the public more than enough sales pitches and superficial platitudes from candidates. As you prepare for the upcoming election, take some time to learn what you want to know about the candidates.

With a little homework, you can go beyond the nonsense and do your duty as a citizen in an informed way.

The best way to learn about a candidate is to talk to him or her personally. Here are a few questions you might ask:

Questions To Ask Candidates And Why Those Questions Matter

- **What is your community involvement beyond party or interest-group allegiance?** A useful mix might include service clubs, civic organizations, or volunteer work for a school or church.
 - **What do you know about how government works?** Prior government experience is not a prerequisite. But dedicated, long-time service at the municipal, school, or county level, shows genuine commitment, as opposed to short-term resume padding aimed at advancing a political career.
 - **What is your vocational experience?** The legislature/Congress need a diversity of experience to tackle today's challenges. Extended experience in finance, health care, agriculture, law, business or economic development provides needed perspectives that are often in short supply. Political internships, Capitol staff jobs, and lobbying fill many legislative profiles today.
 - **How widespread is your support—geographically, professionally, and philosophically?** Amassing endorsements is easy for candidates connected to a single party, ideology, or group. It signals acceptance by a limited part of the political spectrum that can, nevertheless, dominate election rhetoric. But it says little about access to a range of opinion or a candidate's ability to build coalitions, tap into multiple community networks, or seek advice from diverse constituencies. These are the kind of credentials that eventually separate a legislative workhorse from a political show horse.
 - **What is the candidate's stand on the issues that concern you?** Issue positions in candidate brochures and advertising are particularly frustrating. Don't be afraid to dig deeper. Are candidate positions limited to "buzz" words—"promote our values," "support schools," "create jobs," "protect the environment," or "cut bureaucratic red tape"? Does a candidate offer keen insight and an appreciation for complexity, or does he or she rely largely on empty slogans?
 - **How does the candidate conduct herself?** What kind of campaign is he waging? The answer can provide clues to the style of future lawmaking.
 - **Is there heavy reliance on opponent attacks, rather than on communicating skills and ideas?** Is the campaign mechanical and textbook, suggesting behind-the-scenes orchestration from a consultant or party machine? Or, does it exhibit creativity and unconventional thinking that reflect the candidate's personality?
 - **Why are you running?** It seems overly simplistic. But, surprisingly, the response can sometimes lack sincerity, credibility, or specificity. And that in itself reveals a lot about a candidate's character and motivation.
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