

Legislative Toolbox



The Media-Savvy Voter

by Becca Pryse, Valerie Dosland and Bill Amberg

The media will present us with a blizzard of information this fall due to the presidential and other elections. To plow through the blizzard, voters need to be cautious consumers of the information received from the media.

The media tend to, unfortunately, focus on the “horse-race” aspect of campaigns and tend to give short shrift to more substantive analysis of the candidates’ and parties’ positions of the critical issues.

The sound-bite driven nature of modern communications does not lend itself to more detailed reporting. In the metro area, state House candidates rarely make the metro-area and statewide news. If voters rely solely on the front page of the newspaper and the nightly news, they will be inadequately informed come Election Day.

Do your own research. One approach is for voters to be their own reporters. A simple step to learn more about those seeking elected office is to go to the candidates’ websites. Most – if not all candidates – post position papers, speeches, and news items on their websites. If you do not see the issue you are concerned about discussed, call or e-mail the campaign your question(s). Or try a “Google” search of the candidates and the issue you are evaluating. While there is a lot of information on the web for voters to try and wrap their heads around, one great resource for voters that provides nonpartisan information and separates fact from fiction on national races is www.factcheck.org. Local news stations also will cut through Minnesota elections with their own “fact checks.”

If a candidate knocks on your door or you see them at a community forum or event, seize the moment and ask them about the issues you are concerned about. Don’t let them off the hook - ask if they support your view or not, and why. They want your vote, so don’t be shy.

Vary your media sources. Try to mix up your daily news dose by listening to the radio one day, reading the newspaper the next, surfing the web another day, and then tuning in to the television news (and that’s where you see much of the election advertising). Speaking of advertising: consider the source. Federal and state campaign laws require the candidates, parties, and organizations such as Political Action Committees (PACs) to put a disclaimer as to the source in the ad, whether TV, radio, print, or direct mail. Take what other candidates and organizations say about a candidate they oppose with a grain of salt, and then do your own research.

Election Polling. Polls are one of the most overused and over-hyped “stories” that the media publish during an election year. Too often, the stories they run based on their polls focus on the “horse-race” aspect of the election. Results of polls can be skewed by how the questions are phrased and the sample of voters that are included in the survey. In addition, polls have difficulty measuring voter intensity. Although those polled may prefer a certain candidate or policy position, is it enough to get them out and vote?

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Most poll stories now include web links to the actual “raw data” of the poll. Look at how the questions were phrased. Did they poll eligible voters, likely voters, or registered voters? Since Minnesota allows Election Day voter registration, polling of likely voters usually produces more accurate reflections of voter sentiment. Polling registered voters in Minnesota is too narrow, whereas polling eligible voters is often too broad.

Also, as a general rule, the larger the sample size of the poll, the more likely it is that the poll reflects true voter opinion. Self-selecting surveys on media and interest group websites are not scientific and should never be seen as accurate reflections of the mindset of the voting public at a particular instant.

No one ever said that democracy is easy. Hopefully, this Legislative Toolbox will help you and others in making informed voting decisions.