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A Voter's Guide to Voting

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A Voter's Guide to Voting

*Q&A with Scott Borling '96, Sarah Murphy '10,
and Dr. Thomas Mach '88*

In this presidential election year, information about candidates and issues abounds, but it can be tough to make sense of it all. *Inspire* asked three alumni who have an interest in state and local government to address key questions about the voting process.

SCOTT BORLING '96

CITY CLERK | KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

Why do more people vote during presidential election years?

Many people believe it's more important to cast their votes for president of the United States than for state and local offices. In Kalamazoo, four people cast presidential votes for every person who votes in local elections. Yet I would argue that, unless you are a federal employee or in the military, the president makes very few decisions that affect your day-to-day life when compared to the decisions made by your state representative, city council member, or local school board trustees.

How much will you pay for your driver's license? How many police officers patrol your town? Should a new high school be built? Should funding for public universities be cut? Should your city offer health benefits to domestic partners of city employees? Should the state collect income tax on people's pensions (some states don't)? These questions will be answered by state and local officials, not the president, Congress, or the thousands of bureaucrats working for federal agencies.

Hundreds of organizations, besides the political parties, will be encouraging you to vote in the November election. Those energetic efforts will disappear, for the most part, after November.

Why should we take a closer look at local races?

One benefit of relatively quiet local races is the opportunity it affords ordinary citizens to get involved. Most of us don't have the political connections, fundraising savvy, public speaking, and media relations skills to run for federal or even state office. Many of us don't have the appetite for partisan politics. Local offices are more attainable, and there are opportunities to become involved without having to run for election. In many places, the members of local planning commissions, zoning boards, and park committees are appointed, not elected. Participating on these boards, committees,

and commissions allows you to serve your community while you gain experience and develop connections that may lead you to run for elected office.

When voting, I often see local issues and candidates I don't know much about, which causes me to leave a lot of issues blank. Is that common?

"Voter fall-off" is a well-researched and established fact. People tend to stop voting part of the way through a long ballot. The office at the top of the ballot receives the most votes, and each office after that will "lose" votes. Local offices tend to be at the bottom of the ballot, so they receive the fewest votes.

One theory is "voter fatigue"; perhaps people just get tired of voting. Another theory is that people don't want to vote for an unknown candidate, and local candidates (especially from small cities, towns, townships, and villages) are the least covered by the media and the least likely to have well-run campaigns with websites, well-articulated platforms, etc. Residents of large and medium cities can learn about local candidates and issues in the media where those stories are played out. If you live in a small town, you almost have to attend a city council or school board meeting to learn about the candidates and issues.

You may contact Scott at borlings@kalamazoocity.org.



"One benefit of relatively quiet local races is the opportunity it affords ordinary citizens to get involved."



SARAH MURPHY '10

DISTRICT DIRECTOR, STATE REPRESENTATIVE
54TH DISTRICT | PALATINE, ILLINOIS

I've seen commercials, ads, and emails that encourage me to call my congressman. Does that work? What would really happen if I called?

Calling your representative is a great way to get involved, and it helps him or her understand what constituents are thinking. What really happens when you call depends on the reason you are calling.

1. If you call simply to ask your representative to vote for or against a bill, your name and number will be passed along to the representative. Most likely you won't be called back, but your opinion will be considered.
2. If you call for information or would like a meeting, you will be put in touch with a scheduler or a legislative aid. Your representative will do everything in his or her power to meet with you, or a staff member will answer your questions.
3. If you call to voice an opinion on a specific issue, you may receive a call. Sometimes members of the media, action groups, or unions will encourage you to call your representative about a current issue. I worked for a state representative in Illinois who took time to personally return calls to make sure people heard the other side of the issue so they could make an informed decision for themselves.

Representatives love to hear from their constituents, whether encouragement or critique. Responses can vary from state to U.S. representatives. State representatives have smaller districts and more time to interact with constituents. That doesn't mean U.S. representatives won't respond, but it may not be as quickly or as in-depth.

What about form letters and email petitions where you essentially add your name to a scripted message and send it on. Are these effective ways to be heard?

I wouldn't recommend them. Although I haven't had much experience with email forwards, I dealt with a barrage of form letters when I interned at my U.S. representative's office. If someone mailed a form letter, we would catalog it and mail that constituent a form letter about that particular issue. Phone calls are still the best way to get in touch with your state and U.S. representatives. You can either speak with a legislative aid and learn more about the issue or schedule an appointment. When you call, you can go into details that a form letter does not allow.

You may contact Sarah at slmurphy12@gmail.com.



DR. THOMAS MACH, '88

CHAIR, CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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Where can voters find nonpartisan information about candidates and issues?

Your county election board will provide information about who is running, what party each candidate is associated with, and what issues are on the ballot. Your state's secretary of state's office will do the same for state races. Project Vote Smart (votesmart.org) provides nonpartisan information on candidates and members of Congress. The League of Women Voters (lww.org) is another nonpartisan group dedicated to registering and educating voters and improving elections and government.

Most interest groups produce guides that evaluate politicians regarding their conservative or liberal values. Voters can obtain candidate information based on how they are rated by organizations the voter supports or trusts. Two organizations that attempt to evaluate political issues from a biblical perspective include the Family Research Council (frc.org) and the American Policy Roundtable (aproundtable.org).

Is there such a thing as an objective voter guide?

Voter guides are biased by their very nature because they are produced, in most cases, by organizations with a particular political purpose. Voters can rely on voter guides to the extent that they know and agree with the organizations they utilize to obtain those guides. There are few short cuts, however, in obtaining reliable information on candidates and really knowing where they stand on important issues. The candidates usually provide in-depth information about their views on key issues on their websites. 

You may contact Dr. Mach at macht@cedarville.edu.



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