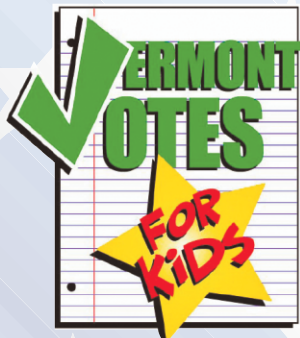


DEMOCRACY in Action



PART 3: EXPLORE CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGNS

Did you know?

Over 50% of political television ads are negative, meaning they verbally attack an opponent.

Ask the Reader

Should candidates be allowed to use negative ads when campaigning?

Talk Back

Since the youth voter turnout between the ages of 18 and 24 is so low, should the voting age be raised to 25?

92% voted NO
7% voted YES

Here's some feedback:

"Getting a driver's license at age 16 but not voting until age 25 doesn't make any sense."

"If a person who is 18 can go to fight a war for our country, they should be able to vote of course."

Web Connection

The Internet is full of information on candidates and issues. However, it can be difficult to determine the source and quality of information on many sites. To help you make good use of this valuable resource, here are sites with non-partisan information.

www.sec.state.vt.us

The "Elections" tab on the Web site for the Secretary of State's Office identifies candidates for elected office in Vermont.

www.lwvofvt.org

The League of Women Voters of Vermont Web site provides valuable information on Vermont elections, non-partisan resources to evaluate candidates, links to the candidates' official websites and a non-partisan voters guide.

www.publicagenda.org

This site provides balanced educational material on key policy issues as well as public opinion polls.

www.vote-smart.org

An excellent site for issue-oriented information on candidates.

Up & Down: The inexact science of polling

During a campaign season, it is impossible to pick up a newspaper, turn on a television or radio, or surf the Internet without seeing or hearing the latest poll. Polls are a fact of life in politics, but how much do we know about polls and how much should we trust their results? The following article gives background on polls and tips on how to be good consumers of their findings.

Can polls be trusted in the first place? And if they are reliable indicators of public opinion, why do they vary so much? Polling is still an inexact science subject to error as well as manipulation. Yet, when they are conducted properly, polls produce a reasonable approximation of where an election race stands at a given time.

Time, however, is often the key wild card. People's opinions may change often, particularly if they lack a strong bond to a party or candidate. Polls can also vary because of the way a sample is chosen, the wording and order of questions, even the time of

day respondents are contacted.

"You have to look at several polls over a period of time and average them," says Karlyn Bowman, polling analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. That's what campaign strategists do when tracking the media polls and that's what they say voters should do as well.

Historically, presidential polls have had a remarkably accurate track record of predicting the winners: The leader on Labor Day is the victor in November. The only recent exception was in 1980, when many polls showed Reagan and President Carter virtually tied in early September. Reagan went on to win the election by 10 points.

Like them or not, polls are a fixture of the political process. *USA Today* Executive Editor Bob Dubill says, "People are curious about election campaigns. Everyone—journalists, politicians, campaign operatives and the public at large—wants to know who is leading,



what's changed and why. Reporters can't interview everybody to find out. But scientifically drawn and conducted polls can take the pulse of the public and provide a sharp snapshot of where the race is at any given time."

Beyond the "horse race" question that gets most of the

attention, media polls also gauge the mood of voters and their stand on issues. Dubill adds, "Journalistically, we would be remiss if we didn't sample the public attitudes," he says. "Polls are the best way we can allow the public to have its say. In a democracy, polls are news."

Media Literacy

As Election Day nears political ads are popping up everywhere. Some ads introduce a candidate by telling who they are and why they are running for office. Others tell the public why they should vote for – or not vote for – a particular candidate. Studies show that most voters get nearly all of their information about political candidates from advertising. Studies also show that while voters don't like attack ads, negative ads work. For this reason it is important to critically evaluate the ads you see.

Don't always believe what you see.

Ads are a way for campaigns to communicate what they want you to hear so that you will vote for their candidate. The images, music and

words are carefully chosen to leave an impression that will sway your vote.

Be careful of tricky wording.

Candidates will almost always use carefully chosen words to sway your vote. For example, "defending America" and "the invasion of Iraq" are two ways of describing the war in Iraq. One sounds positive and one sounds negative.

Music and images in ads.

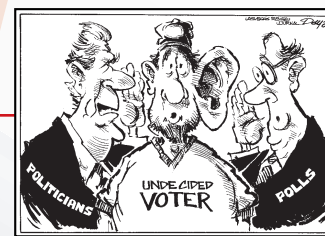
Music and visual images affect our feelings in a subtle but important way. TV and radio ads will have background music that is intended to make the featured candidate seem good or bad. A positive ad will generally have beautiful images and upbeat or sweet music that leaves one feeling good. A negative ad

might include black and white footage and ominous sounding music that is designed to make the viewer concerned.

Make sure to check the facts. For example, Rich Tarrant ads claim that Bernie Sanders voted against extending the Milk Income Loss Contract that would benefit Vermont's dairy farmers, while Sanders claims that he helped create the program in the first place and that he never voted against its extension. Two conflicting claims, you must find the facts!

Be careful of campaign slogans.

Campaigns use slogans to help define their candidate. For example, a Bernie Sanders slogan is "America needs a new direction," and a Rich Tarrant slogan is "Serious times demand seri-



ous leadership." Each slogan is designed to make the candidate sound capable – but they are merely words. It is important to look beyond the slogans and get the facts!

Where to go to research candidates:

You can get the facts by reading the newspaper and news magazines' in depth coverage of candidates and campaigns. Visit candidates' campaign websites and non-partisan websites designed to give voters the facts about the candidates. The Secretary of State publishes a candidate information guide that can be viewed at <http://vermont-elections.org/soshome.htm>.

Image Matters: Digging into Campaign Ads

Political campaign ads are carefully crafted to create impressions of the candidate or his or her opponents. Join with classmates or your family to become critical sleuths by uncovering some of the persuasive visual tricks and techniques ad creators use.

As you look at campaign ads on TV or in print, ask, What do the creators want viewers to think or feel about the candidate (or opponent) and how do they convey that? Delve into the details by asking yourselves these questions and discussing what each strategy "says" about the candidate:

- What is the location (for example, a hometown senior center or an executive desk)?
 - What props or symbols are used (a flag, a polluted river, family members)?
 - What clothing is featured (rolled-up shirt sleeves, military uniform, or business suit)?
 - What fears or concerns do the images appeal to (unemployment line)?
 - What facial emotions are portrayed (adoring supporters or fearful crime victim)?
 - How are printed words used (large blocks of text stamped over images)?
- Did your ads provide more substance or image? Which do you think is more important?
- (Note: If you can videotape some ads, look at each 3 times: with sound only, with image but no sound, with both sound and image. What new techniques do you notice each time?)