



Guide to Informed Voting

One of our most influential powers as citizens is exercising our right to vote. However, with this power comes a civic responsibility to consider our options and make informed decisions when electing representatives to office. This is not always an easy task, especially with the constant efforts by campaigns to persuade voters to elect certain politicians. In today's fast-paced society, it may seem difficult to remain informed without spending hours reading through articles to find the most accurate information. This guide offers areas of explanation that will help voters understand what they should consider in order to cast informed votes. Specifically it will offer insight on campaign finance and political rhetoric.

What does it mean to be an informed voter?

Being an informed voter means to be knowledgeable about the issues and positions of candidates when voting. It also means you are able to make decisions without influence from outside factors intended to persuade those who may not fully understand a candidate's platform or ideas.

What is political rhetoric?

Rhetoric is known as the art of persuasion. Therefore, political rhetoric refers to the strategies used in politics to create persuasive arguments. Those running for office usually put a great deal of effort into determining how to craft their messages to persuade voters.

How is political rhetoric used?

If you've ever paid attention to a political campaign, chances are the politician was using political rhetoric. Some common places you will see political rhetoric are during speeches and debates.

When preparing for speeches, candidates will often highlight their strengths, stress their opponent's flaws, and protect themselves from their own weaknesses. The speeches are rehearsed and often written by professionals who help the candidate use rhetoric which will be meaningful to the particular audience. Speech writers usually consider what the background of the audience is and what is likely to persuade the demographic of voters the candidate is addressing.

It is also important to understand the political rhetoric used in debates. Candidates tend to write and rehearse possible answers for potential questions. During the debates, candidates will link answers to a larger theme often drawing from **talking points**. Talking points are developed to determine what the candidate will refer to when responding to questions or speaking on-the-spot. Candidates often incorporate the talking points into everyday conversations on the campaign trail when speaking to voters.

What is political symbolism?

One major part of running a campaign is the use of political symbolism. Political symbols are an effective communication strategy for candidates because of the ambiguity. Candidates use political symbolism because when they give more details to the public they may not be able to persuade as many individuals.

Political symbolism can be seen through telling stories, such as referring to our founding fathers. Additionally, it can include performing certain rituals. The candidates will participate in activities where they draw attention to their related interests (with voters) in a compelling way. Examples include attending county fairs, shaking hands with voters, playing with babies, and attending coffees to meet the public. The photos below show an example of common political symbolism used during the 2015 primary campaigns.



Hillary Clinton at campaign event in New Hampshire



Jeb Bush at a campaign event in New Hampshire

Another common ritual is the use of **buzzwords**. Buzzwords are terms such as freedom, justice, liberty, etc. They are terms that evoke emotion from voters and paint the politician or candidate in a positive light. For example, when a politician refers to the “middle-class”, this is a vague term that many Americans claim to identify with; however, the term is broad and therefore can appeal to many voters who believe that the term “middle-class” applies to them. Again, buzzwords are powerful in campaigns because they try to make the candidate or politician appealing without revealing specific information about their plans for office.

Example of Buzzwords:



Rep. Steve King (R-IA)

“I come to the floor today to speak about the intrusion into a God-given American Freedom called Obamacare...It is an unconstitutional taking of our God-given American Liberty...”¹



Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)

“This is an extraordinary day for American values, for America’s best traditions of progress, the LGBT Americans, and really for all Americans. This is another day that will go in the history books as a moment when our nation expanded the reach of the highest ideals of our constitution and our democracy.”²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fKHxm46rH0>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKI5IzniE1k>

What are campaign ad strategies?

There are three major types of campaign ads during elections:

1. **Bio Ads** are positive ads which help develop a candidate's image. They are run early in campaigns to stimulate name recognition amongst the public and to generate partisan support. (See example below³)



2. **Attack Ads** point out the negative characteristics of the opposing candidates. They can either use a dark or entertaining approach. (See example below⁴)



3. **Response Ads** are created to refute the attack ads from the candidate's opponents. (See example below⁵)



What is issue framing?

Framing an issue is when a politician presents an idea in a light that makes the audience likely agree with their point. Research is often conducted to find out what word choices will evoke the most emotional reactions. Framing an issue can be seen in various political initiatives such as “No Child Left Behind.” The issue is framed in an effective way because hardly anybody disagrees that we should not leave children behind. It is important to be aware of issue framing during campaigns.

It is important to understand that news media also frames issues. Media outlets are often referred to as “gatekeepers” because they control what information is released to the public and what information is left out. As voters, it is important to be aware that information still exists outside of what the media covers and to pay attention to more than what is in the news.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFpPh9QB2qg>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUAP_WMr2fw

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3lwSSTEvNU>

What is this talk about big money running politics?

You may have heard discussions about the 1% and the 99% in the recent years and references to the Supreme Court ruling, *Citizen's United*. Some Americans have felt that those earning the most money in the country have more ability to influence the outcome of elections than those with less money. They believe that politicians are more likely to give preference to those who donate the most money to their campaigns. Typically the presidential candidate who raises more money is predicted as more likely to win the overall election. Those who raise concern with big money in politics feel like their voice will not be heard because the politicians will listen to people who donate more money to their campaigns and prioritize their voice/opinions.

What is a PAC?

PAC stands for Political Action Committee. A PAC, according to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), can:

1. Raise funds up to \$5,000 per calendar year to donate to candidates.
2. Give up to \$15,000 to a political party
3. Give up to \$5,000 to other PACs
4. Receive up to \$5,000 from individuals

It is extremely easy to set up a PAC and they are created all the time, especially by politicians as ways to negotiate favors. The FEC regulations were put into place to limit the amount of spending that could occur.

What are Super PACs?

In 2010, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that limitations on the amount of money individuals may contribute to the PAC *SpeechNow.org*, and amount the organization can accept from individuals was a violation of the First Amendment. The ruling of *SpeechNow.org vs. FEC* created a new type of PAC. Known as "Super PACs", these groups are allowed to spend as much money as they want by advocating for or against candidates. However, they cannot donate directly to candidates or parties. Super PACs can spend unlimited amounts of money as long as they do not coordinate with the candidate they are providing support or opposition for.

Many have issues with Super PACs because they do not believe they are restricted enough. Super PACs have been criticized for a lack of effective monitoring of "coordinating" between a candidate and the group. This presents a problem for many because it essentially is a way to provide the candidate even more money to run their campaigns. This segment from comedians Stephen Colbert and John Stewart illustrates how loose the term "coordinating" can be. (See example below.⁶)



⁶ <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/av6bvX/colbert-super-pac---coordination-resolution-with-jon-stewart>

ADP/TDC Recommendations:

In order to stay informed, ADP and TDC encourage you to take the following actions during the upcoming election when making your voting decisions.

1. **Use reliable sources.** When researching the candidates, use scholarly sources and non-partisan news outlets. You can find our suggestions of good non-partisan sources in our [Voter Education Resources](#) and [Political Engagement Apps](#).
2. **Be an active listener/researcher.** When candidates are using political rhetoric to persuade their audience, it's important to read between the lines to understand what they are really saying. When listening to or reading the messages, see if the politicians address the issues/questions raised, or if they use political rhetoric strategies to avoid giving a direct answer.
3. **Do NOT be cynical.** Many may feel after reading the information in the aforementioned categories that voting will not make a difference. However, it is important to understand that if more people decide not to vote, our democracy will be at greater risk. The healthiest democracy is one where everyone participates. At the end of the day, we the people hold the power. It is up to us to be aware of these campaign strategies and create change, but it will only happen if we all play our part.

Campaign rhetoric information referenced from:

- *Media Power in Politics*, 6th Edition - Doris A. Graber
- *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices* – Judith S. Trent and Robert V. Friedenberg.