

United Methodist Women's Guide to Voter Responsibility



I. Be clear about what you believe.

United Methodist Women understand and analyze today's issues in the context of our faith in a loving God. As followers of Jesus Christ we strive to continue his challenging ministry with the captive, the blind, the oppressed, the poor, the widowed, and the weak. Scripture teaches us that no forms of injustice are tolerable and no aspects of nature or human existence are unimportant to those who praise God.

Our legacy as women organized for mission includes significant actions taken by our foremothers to urge those in power to care for the needs of women, children and youth. The Bible and the Social Principles and Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church form the foundation for our faith in action. The Women's Division's policy statement, "Ministries with Women and Ministries with Children and Youth", gives focus to our strong commitment to justice. The PURPOSE of United Methodist Women calls us to raise our voices for women, children and youth.

2. Study and understand the issues.

What issues are you most concerned about? What does your faith lead you to believe needs to be done about them? Mainstream media approach issues in a way that catches the public's attention. They appeal to the emotional reactions of their readers, viewers and listeners. Responsible citizens and voters look beyond the headlines for deeper analysis and understanding. As Christian women we address issues from a faith and justice perspective. This requires us to approach issues with open minds and hearts. And, our devotion to mission requires us to try to understand the issues from the perspective of those who are most affected by policy decisions.

- ❖ Read materials that address today's critical issues from a faith and justice perspective. Form discussion groups with others from your local unit or congregation. Sources of information include the Bible, the Social Principles, the Book of Resolutions, the policy statement, "Ministries with Women and Ministries with Children and Youth", Response, New World Outlook and the Reading Program.

3. Know your candidates

Individuals choose to run for public office for many reasons. It's important to know why your candidates have chosen to run for office, what qualifications they have, what values they hold and what issues they plan to address if elected. Look for candidates who:

- ❖ comprehend the needs of women, children and youth and show a commitment to meet them;
- ❖ reflect the fundamental values you believe are important to your community, the nation and the world;
- ❖ respond to community concerns and needs;
- ❖ can provide leadership and build consensus in the midst of conflict and disagreement; and
- ❖ display the moral integrity necessary for public leadership.

Be wary of candidates who appear out of nowhere and have questionable sources of funds and other support. (You may even want to investigate who funds your candidates.) There are many candidates who refuse to participate in public discussions or debates, who "campaign" by leaving leaflets on cars in church parking lots, and who claim to be the moral candidate. These "stealth candidates" hide who they are for a reason. They know voters would seriously question their candidacy if their views became widely known. Voters in our democracy have a right to know about their candidates. Don't be swayed by irresponsible candidates!

4. Do not tolerate political mudslinging.

These are the days of rapid communication and 15-second sound bites. Politicians and their campaigns try to catch voters' attention by making accusations and charges against their opponents and drawing on voters' fears. The informed voter recognizes these tactics as cheap and diversionary. What do voters gain from this kind of behavior among those who want to represent us in elected office?

- ❖ Encourage candidates to run clean and honest campaigns that help voters learn the most they can about what the candidates stand for.

5. Force candidates to talk about a wide range of issues.

When politicians do not hear from their constituents they alone determine the issues of a campaign. In recent years candidates have often defined their campaigns around abortion and homosexuality. These are important issues but they are not the only ones elected officials have to handle. Candidates often play on voters' fears in order to place abortion and homosexuality at the center of debates and to divert voter attention away from more critical issues. This will continue unless voters demand to know their candidates' opinions on issues like violence against women and children, funding for education, labor rights, racial justice, budget priorities, gambling, the environment, crime, etc.

- ❖ Attend town meetings. Plan an issue forum at your local church and invite candidates to make presentations. Request materials from candidates' headquarters that explain their views. Learn how your candidates feel about issues that matter to you.

6. Investigate what/who is behind the message.

Voters increasingly have the opportunity to decide state and local policies at the ballot box. Ballot initiatives and propositions have been proposed on issues ranging from land use to civil rights for gays and lesbians to budget priorities. Advertisements supporting and opposing the issues will appear on television, the radio and in newspapers paid for by a variety of organizations. Sometimes the message is so smooth that we have a difficult time determining the perspective of the supporting organization. Does the Committee for Excellence in Academics advocate increased funding for public education or school vouchers? Who's behind the Information Council on the Environment? (The National Coal Association...it proclaims global warming is a myth.) Are "wise use" groups part of the environmental justice movement? Where are the radical groups and what are they supporting? What about hate groups?

- ❖ Uncover the sources of information and funds of the advertisers who work to influence your vote. Many of these groups have names that sound harmless. However, their agendas would radically change our communities. Watch for words like *sensible*, *responsible* and *sound* in organizations' names. Contact organizations with a track record of work for justice and request names and descriptions of groups to watch.

7. VOTE!

Exercise your civic responsibility remembering that there are many around the world who view this as a privilege because they cannot vote in their own countries. Our Christian social responsibility includes participating in advocacy for women, children and youth.

8. Require elected officials to keep campaign promises.

Continue your advocacy for women, children and youth by monitoring the actions of your elected officials and reminding them to keep their promises.

- ❖ Keep track of the issues that are most important to you. Watch how your legislators and other elected officials address them. Take opportunities to attend school board meetings and council hearings. Write, call or visit your state and national representatives. Collect voting records from Interfaith Impact and other organizations.