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A Voters guide for Dummies

I have been on both sides of an election: A candidate for supervisor in Calaveras County in 1992 and a candidate for Assembly member of the 5th California District in 2012. I have voted in almost every election since the age of 18 here in California, Maryland and New York. Whether you're a candidate or a constituent, I can tell you the system is not effective unless voters fully understand their own political ideologies, the initiatives or the candidates' platforms and actually participate in the election process.

The first – and in my opinion, the most important – thing every voter should do before researching the ballot initiatives or candidates is to find out what your political ideology is. See my prior guest column “What is your political heading?” from July 2, 2013, or visit politicalcompass.org.

Forget about aligning yourself with a political party until you are sure your beliefs are similar to its own. Am I a free-market person or economically “collective” – right of center or left of center? Are my social beliefs more libertarian or authoritarian? Like me, you might be fiscally conservative (right of center) but socially moderate (Libertarian). While campaigning, I found many voters initially stated they were of a particular political ideology, but after a quick self-examination, they realized they did not share most of those beliefs. Whether you align with the economic left or right or as authoritarian or libertarian, your personal beliefs should be taken into consideration and your voting decisions should not only benefit you but the majority as well.

Second, the qualities that every elected representative – from local council member to our president – should possess are universal. A candidate should be a great communicator, disciplined fiscal manager and honest, with good moral character. One should also have exemplary problem-solving abilities and finally, candidates should take responsibility for their mistakes, correct them expeditiously and learn not to do it again.

Third, candidates from local government to statewide contests have enough information on their websites, sample ballot statements and live forums so you have no excuse to say, “I do not know what he or she stands for.”

Incumbents are especially informative. You can simply look up their voting records. Don't like the way they vote on issues? Find candidates who more closely reflect your qualities and values. Just because they have letters behind their names (D, R, G, etc.) does not mean that a particular candidate would be

your best candidate for the job. Remember, every primary contest in California can now be won by the top two vote earners regardless of party affiliation.

I had a reader once comment on a past op-ed of mine. He stated political parties excuse the voter from doing any critical thinking when it comes to selecting a candidate or voting on an initiative. Maybe that's why we have the political gridlock we do. I've always said a smart voter is an independent voter.

Fourth, who is endorsing whom? If the endorsements are from persons or organizations that meet the above criteria that you also agree with, then that adds credence to your choice. Endorsements can be very helpful in defining a candidate or initiative. A word of caution though: Endorsers can be motivated by special interests, therefore narrow in benefit and not for the overall good of the majority.

Having determined what your own political ideology is (undiluted by political parties, candidate bias, advertisements or other forms of persuasion) and researched your candidates thoroughly, if you still can't decide that one candidate is better than the others, then abstain. This is not a final exam, driving test or scholastic aptitude test. I do not recommend guessing. Your nonvote may be better than a vote that ultimately causes more harm to the majority. Initiatives are usually "yes or no" so making a choice hopefully will be easier if you have done your homework.

In closing, find out about yourself and your political ideology. Do your candidate and ballot initiative homework. Endorsements from individuals and organizations that align with yours are good indicators. A nonvote for a candidate or initiative is still a vote if you are absolutely unsure of a choice. And finally, vote every time you have the opportunity, and encourage as many others as you can to do the same. You can use my voting guide for dummies to help educate others.