guides.vote

Creating Your Own Nonpartisan Candidate Guides:
Adapting the guides.vote Approach

Every election cycle, guides.vote creates nonpartisan candidate guides to help people sort through candidate positions and choose who to support. Our main focus has been students and youth, but the guides are useful for any voter. We publish the guides online and in a popular one-sheet double-sided printable format.

Since we have the staff time to create guides for just about 45 races per cycle, we'd love to see schools and community groups adapting our format and approach to create their own additional nonpartisan guides for other races. Doing so can be a terrific learning and community-building opportunity. Creating guides may be a project for a school political science or journalism class or an existing community group.

You'll probably want to replicate our one-sheet double-sided format so you can easily print and hand out your completed guides. You'll also want to post them online and distribute them through social media.

What to Do, in Brief

Put together a team. This team doesn't need to be big; the size will depend on how many guides you want to create. You'll need a person (or people) to research and write the guides. You can look for someone who has these skills, or someone who is really motivated to learn. You'll need at least one editor (two are better) to go over the draft guide for accuracy, fairness, and clarity. If you're creating multiple guides, you'll need someone to hold the whole project together.

And finally, you'll need an advisor, someone who can answer policy questions, help choose topics, and do a nonpartisanship/fairness review at the end. On campus, this might be a political science professor in the community, maybe a librarian, a high school history or social studies teacher, or a local newspaper editor.

Create a plan. How many guides do you want to—and think you can—create? Which races do you want to cover? Mayor? City Council? State Senate? US House? Assign roles as to who will be doing what. And then create a rough schedule based on primary dates (so you know who the final candidates are) and how long you think each step of the project will take. If this is a volunteer effort, it can be hard to meet deadlines, but the schedule can help you plan and know if you're falling behind.

Choose your issues. Look at the guides.vote issues as examples, but you'll need to review local and regional issues as well. Choose a wide variety of issues that are of broad interest for your community. There might be a local environmental problem, a local ballot initiative, or differing positions on real estate development or police oversight. Even if there is a salient "hot button" issue in an election you are covering, make sure to include candidate views on other issues as well.

Write your questions. See below for tips as to how to write effective questions that cover the issues you've chosen. As you put the questions together, be aware of possible bias creeping in.

Reality check: it's good to use questions on which candidates differ, but if your guide has most answers as "Yes" for one candidate and "No" for the other, you should reword the questions so each candidate has some "Yes" and some "No" answers. A guides.vote guide generally includes roughly 15 questions. You can opt for fewer, depending on your resources.

Research the candidates. Research the answers for each candidate and document your research in a collection of notes. The notes will help your editor follow your work and your thought processes. See below for research tips and resources.

Write your answers. Keep the answers short to fit into the guide format. Make sure to include source links in the text. See below for answer-writing tips and things to avoid.

Edit and test for fairness. Edit the answers for clarity and accuracy, and working with your advisor, test for fairness; make sure that the guides are fair and nonpartisan.

Credit guides.vote and let us know. We'd appreciate you letting us know and crediting us for the model and template but making clear that these guides are your own creation. Here's some language to use:

> *Created by [name of organization], inspired by the approach of guides.vote a national effort to create meticulously researched and transparently sourced nonpartisan guides to candidate positions.*

Distribute the guides. The finished guides may take the form of web pages, email attachments, and printable PDFs. See How to Distribute the Guides on Campus and How to Distribute the Guides in Your Community for more information.

The Steps in Detail

Identifying the Issues

You can start by using or adapting the issues and questions from the guides.vote guides. For U.S. House races, the questions will be similar to those we've created for U.S. Senate guides. State and local races will feature many similar issues but will also differ in some important ways. So, for those, you can start by looking at our gubernatorial guides. For example, education policy will feature more prominently in state or local races. You will want your guide to cover a wide variety of different issues of interest to the voters you're working to inform.

Some local issues that previous guides have included: a Virginia gubernatorial guide asked whether candidates supported the contested extension of the DC Metrorail further into suburban Virginia. An Alaska guide included a question on the controversial Bristol Bay Pebble Mine. And Florida guides asked questions about a ballot initiative to restore ex-felon voting rights and ways candidates would address an extensive toxic algae bloom.

Writing Effective Questions

The guides.vote questions usually present a binary choice: Yes or No, Support or Oppose, Tighten or Loosen. They should be simple and concise. Be careful to phrase questions in a neutral manner that does not indicate a "right" or "wrong" answer, or that does not advantage one candidate over another. See the guides.vote guides for examples.

Documenting Your Research

Once you have questions, you'll need to research the answers. (See below for a list of resources.) Although some candidate positions are a straightforward yes or no, some will require searching multiple sources and wading through partial, dated, confusing, or contested information. As you begin your research, create a set of notes to document what you've found. For each question, create a list of sources for each candidate. Try to find two to four sources for each candidate and each question (if you can only find one, and it is sufficiently authoritative, go with that). For each source quote or fact, include a couple of paragraphs of surrounding text if possible for context, as well as the source link and the date if you can find it. Focus your research on nonpartisan, reputable sources of news and information, such as the outlets we link to in our guides. For source and approaches to avoid, see our primer "Avoiding Deception: Detecting Disinformation."

These notes will grow as you proceed through the questions. A good set of notes will help you in writing a good answer. It also provides a central location for gathering your research. It can prevent repetitive searching for the same information, and helps your editors and reviewers check your work for accuracy. Notes also provide documented sources for your answers if they're challenged by candidates or campaigns.

Writing the Answers

Length. We suggest answers of no more than 35 words, with 15 to 25 words being the average.

Yes/No Answers. If you've structured your questions so that they can be answered with a simple Yes/No (or Support/Oppose) answer, you can begin with that answer followed by a supporting sentence or sentences that may include a candidate quote. Make sure to add links in the text to your sources. (Try not to make the whole answer linked text; that can make it hard to read.) You can see examples at guides.vote.

Mixed Answers. Sometimes a candidate's positions may not allow for a yes or no answer. For example, on guns a candidate may support expanded background checks but oppose regulation of semi-automatic weapons. Or they may support an earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but only with additional investment in border security. They may be among the large number of state legislators who opposed medical marijuana legalization except for a particular high-CBD extract useful for addressing childhood epilepsy. Use "Mixed" to summarize those situations and include examples of both positions. Don't worry about including every facet of a particular issue.

Unclear Answers. When you find information that's confusing or appears to be contradictory, even after extensive searching, use "Unclear," with a brief summary of the unclear position.

Unavailable Answers. Sometimes answers are unavailable or unclear. If you're unable to find a credible answer, you can say "No position found." If you're unable to find a credible answer for both candidates on any particular question, we suggest dropping the question.

Discrepancies. Note that you may uncover discrepancies. A candidate may give conflicting statements in two different places, or their positions on their website may not match their legislative voting record. It's not the guide's job to present a gotcha. But it's worthwhile to mention positions that are taken in primaries or are based on actions taken as an elected official that may contradict statements on the candidate's website or elsewhere.

Candidates in Agreement. Sometimes candidates will agree on a specific issue, and that's okay. But you will want to include enough issues that can show contrasts between the candidates.

Creating a Guide Template

To make the final guide, create a guide template that is like the guides.vote format, with three columns. The questions are on the left, and then the answers (the two candidates' positions) are in the next two columns. If you have a three-candidate race (we use consistent 15 percent in the polls to qualify a third-party candidate), use four columns. Put each candidate's name, party affiliation, and photo at the top of their column.

Temptations to Avoid

Accuracy is critical, so as you work, you'll want to avoid these temptations:

- **Using unconfirmed answers.** Sometimes you will find an apparent answer immediately and will be tempted to use it without confirmation. If it's a clear quote from a mainstream media source, like a public statement, it's probably accurate, but you'll want to check additional sources where possible.

- **Guessing based on the candidate's overall leanings.** It can be tempting to assume, for instance, that a candidate who opposes or supports climate change regulations because of a position on the legitimacy of government regulation will also oppose or support regulations on guns. That may prove true. But you can't extrapolate from one position to another.

- **Losing objectivity.** You may find yourself supporting or opposing a particular candidate and their views. That's fine, but you then need to be extra careful to maintain your objectivity in terms of providing accurate answers, whatever your personal views. When in doubt about whether you've been fair and accurate, reread each answer, recheck your sources, and let your editor or reviewer know your concerns. The goal is to present fair, nonpartisan portrayals of the candidates.

Editing and Reviewing the Work

When a researcher/writer has completed a draft guide, it needs to go to an editor who will check it for clarity, accuracy, and impartiality, as well as checking links and fixing any typos and grammatical errors. If you can have two people each give the draft an editorial pass, that's even better. And then have the advisor mentioned above do a final quality review.

Sharing Guides with Candidate Campaigns

Writers who create candidate guides sometimes wonder whether they should give the guides to the campaigns and have them complete the answers or show them to campaigns before finalizing and distributing it.

Logical as it may seem, we don't recommend sending the guide questions to candidates and relying on them for the answers. Most campaigns typically won't complete questionnaires, and you may waste valuable time waiting for them to do so. And if they do respond, the answers may not be consistent with positions you've already discovered. You'll still have to write a final response.

For example, when a University of Kentucky class called "Citizen Kentucky: Journalism and Democracy" created an excellent guide to the state's 2015 governor's race, they waited and waited

for answers. As a result, their guide didn't come out until a week before the election, limiting the amount of time voters had to read and reflect on the valuable information in the guide. The guides.vote guides are therefore based on research from public sources.

It's fine to show the final draft of your guide to a campaign, but we suggest that you share only the answers you've written for their candidate and not those for their opponent. It's also essential to set a strict deadline for them to respond by. Be willing to distribute it without their feedback if they don't respond within this timeframe. If they flag an inaccuracy, that's fine, but never give them veto power over the phrasing or framing of your answers. If you do elect to share drafts with campaigns for review, you must do so with respect to both/all candidates in the election.

Guides.vote follows the procedures of candidate debates and uses a polling threshold of 15% for including candidates in a general election. For primaries, you would of course need to include a wider number of candidates.

You can also show the guides to candidates' supporters. On campus, you can try running the completed guides by the school's Young Republicans and Young Democrats, as a test for fairness and accuracy.

Further Information

For further information see [Nonprofit Vote](#) and [Bolder Advocacy](#)'s guides to producing nonpartisan candidate questionnaires and voter guides.

Good luck in creating your guides. They take work but are a powerful way to inform voters.

Appendix I: Research Resources

Much of the guides.vote information comes from web searches, and many of those searches produce content from mainstream media: major local newspapers, candidate public statements covered on local TV or radio stations, and sometimes national media sites. But these sources must be credible. If your original source has a partisan spin, then you want to make sure that they've sourced their information upstream from credible sources and presented them accurately. A partisan blog or magazine by itself, or sourced from another partisan blog or magazine, may give ideas about areas to explore. But it's not a credible ultimate source. You'll want to do enough searching to come up with clear and credible examples of where a candidate stands. Here is a run-through of what else is available:

Candidate websites and social media feeds. Some candidate websites present detailed policy positions, others only a few general themes. But they're worth a check. Social media may also present some candidate views. Especially when you're not finding answers, a scroll through a candidate's Twitter feed maybe useful. Don't spend a huge amount of time, but you can sometimes find positions that don't come up in search, as when a candidate tweets "I support this!" with a link to a news article. And you can check to see if what's on a website or a feed matches with what the candidate has said or done elsewhere.

[Vote Smart](#) does lots of useful research, vets candidate positions carefully, and is always worth checking. However, their format can be difficult to access, particularly for cross-candidate comparisons. The amount of information they present also depends on whether the candidate has taken their Vote Smart Political Courage Test. Many candidates no longer take the test, so that some of

CREATING NONPARTISAN GUIDES

the answers are from test questionnaires completed years ago.

Wikipedia can be hit or miss, depending on how detailed a candidate's entry is. But some candidate profiles can include detailed lists of issues and positions. Make sure to check the links in the footnotes. Sometimes these links go to less-credible sources, while others can go to valid news articles and similar sources that you may not have found in search.

Audio and video. Increasingly, candidates will appear on independent podcasts and online video shows. If there's no transcript, it may not be worth spending 90 minutes to listen to the whole thing. But if the hosting web page says, "Hear what candidate Smith says about guns, abortion, and immigration," it may be worth a listen. (Be sure to note the timestamp of anything you use, so your editor or reviewer can follow you and find it easily.)

Factcheck.org won't give you comprehensive stands, but if you are researching a candidate's stand on a particular issue, you'll find a credible and nuanced picture if they cover it. You can also use Factcheck's search engine for general information, but it primarily weighs in on claims in campaign ads.

PolitiFact is another reliable fact checking site, produced by the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit school for journalists.

VOTE411.org is produced by the League of Women Voters, long respected as a premier nonpartisan provider of election-related resources. The site lets you look up candidates by zip code (you can use the zip code of a workplace or school in their district), and it may include both candidate statements and excellent information on ballot initiatives.

Appendix II: Sample Guides

In 2018, students from Salisbury University produced four local guides. Salisbury University is a public university on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The students created guides for local County Executive and County Commissioner races, along with races for District 37A and District 37B in the Maryland House of Delegates. (Note: these guides use footnotes. We now recommend embedding source links directly in the guide text.)

From Salisbury University:

> Teams of upper-level political science students analyzed numerous sources, including candidate websites and brochures, local and state newspaper archives, and a videotaped candidate forum that was filmed by a local cable access organization and posted on YouTube. Students in a lower-level Poli Sci 101 course then evaluated the guides, looking for quality of resources, citations, and accuracy. The upper-level students then revised the guides based on the insights and critiques of the Poli Sci 101 students.

> One of the challenges was to find six to eight issues where each candidate in a specific race took a position. As campaign strategy often leads candidates to offer broad platitudes on issues, students had to select sources that allowed them to pinpoint stances on significant policy concerns, particularly where candidates differed. Moreover, Salisbury students wanted to make sure that the guides' information was accurately referenced in detailed footnotes. To achieve this, in addition to working together with their classmates from two courses, students worked with two political science professors and a campus research librarian.