An Election Year Survival Guide

Your vote counts! In fact, it counts so much that over a billion dollars could be spent in the coming months to influence it in any way humanly possible.

You see, it’s not just about political advertisements anymore, or automated telephone “robocalls,” polls, or the televised debates. It’s now also about the prospect of “Super PACs” and the virtually unlimited funds such “Political Action Committees” can use to influence the outcome of an election.

How can you possibly survive the avalanche of advertisements, the relentless rhetoric, and the political propaganda yet to be unleashed? Quite well, actually – if you prepare yourself now!

Please be prepared to…

- **not** be easily swayed by words, images, or feelings. *Positive* political advertisements try to portray (or overstate) a candidate’s strengths. The uplifting background music, attractive imagery, and reassuring statements of a professional announcer are all designed to make you feel that particular candidate is a good choice – even if the facts suggest otherwise.

- **investigate** any claims made – especially negative ads which try to denounce or discredit a candidate in any number of ways. The worst kinds of these ads attack a person’s character instead of her or his record of achievements or failures. Such ads try to get you to doubt or disregard a candidate. We invite you to visit the Media Watchdogs section of our Current Interests Center (thrall.org/current). There you will find potentially useful links to investigative journalists, news analysts, and fact checkers.

- **watch for inconsistencies.** Has a candidate switched positions (“flip-flopped”) on an issue? Were conflicting or hypocritical statements made? Is a candidate deliberately unclear or evasive?

- **go beyond sound bites.** Sound bites are selective quotes, catchy phrases – words which are partially presented and often taken out of context. A candidate might use sound bites to twist and misuse an opponent’s words in confusing, embarrassing, or publicly infuriating ways. Try to track down the original and complete statements (speeches, audio/video, transcripts, etc.) so you can learn what was really said and draw your own conclusions.

- **dissect the talking points.** Talking points are words, labels, phrases, and arguments quoted repeatedly (often using the same words) by a candidate and/or that candidate’s supporters. This coordinated tactic can be used by political party members to help themselves “stay on message,” but it can also be used to repeat something (factual or not) until people hear it often enough and tend to believe it.

- **watch the numbers.** Don’t fall for deceptive digits or fearful figures pulled out of thin air. Consider who presents those numbers, what their sources are, when that information was created, and why. Is there any motive? Are the numbers up-to-date, authoritative, complete? How were they calculated?

- **form your own opinion.** Make your own informed decision based on where candidates (and their political parties) stand with respect to any issue important to you and your community.

In a regular year, mass media is all about the hype. It’s even worse during election years, so try not to rely exclusively on news outlets, magazines, websites, radio or television talk show hosts for your complete understanding of a candidate. Please consult multiple sources and use your library.

Never venture into voting booths unaware. Please ask all the questions and do the research required to reach the truth before you cast your vote. Educated voters are the essence of democracy!

Please visit our online Election guide for more information: www.thrall.org/election2012

We also offer free Critical Thinking Skills guides at www.thrall.org/think