

OCPA FaxLine Report

a public policy information service for members of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, Inc.

Dear OCPA Member:

Thursday, September 4, 2008

“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe,” noted Albert Einstein. It's what I call an “ouchie!” That's a quote of a biting nature with more truth to it than most want to accept. When it comes to deciding who to vote for, many people feel rather stupid about the candidates' positions. That's because candidates often choose to obfuscate their real positions to keep from alienating as many voters as possible. Here's six suggestions for asking candidates questions in public forums which may help you discover their real beliefs and ideas.

1) **Ask for specifics.** When candidates start talking abstractly and in generalities about their ideas of governing, ask them for examples. This brings them down to earth and forces them to realize their rhetoric must be backed up with tangibles.

2) **Avoid being star struck.** Incumbents are always treated differently than challengers. It's because they already have the title of “representative” or “senator” and are afforded that respect by voters. Okay, it's appropriate to address them as “Representative” or “Senator” but don't get too impressed or let their title prevent you from holding them accountable for their votes. Remember, they are “public servants.”

3) **Know your facts.** Pick an issue that is most important to you and delve into it. Find out everything you can about it. Who voted for it and against it and why -- public statements -- private pronouncements -- campaign literature. How do other citizens view the issue (polling data, letters to the editor, etc.) Sharpen your questions based on knowledge of the issue -- then hone them further to a fine point.

4) **Keep questions short.** Remember you can help others understand the candidate if you ask questions that don't confuse the issue with long extraneous commentary. Pontificate at your civic club or with friends at lunch, but don't waste everyone's time showing off your brilliance to strangers who really don't care. Ask your question, listen for the answer, and then quickly hit with a follow-up question.

5) **Determine their passion.** Most candidates have an issue that has motivated them to enter the political arena. Many have emotional stories they gladly share with constituents about a part of government they want to change. By determining their interests and motivations you know how to couch your questions. “Since you seek to improve education Senator, I'm sure you are aware of an OCPA poll that suggests the majority of Oklahoma parents are in favor of school choice. Your opinion, please. ”

6) **Don't get stuck on stupid.** Make sure your questions are timely and not overtly confrontational. When General Honore was commander of the Joint Task Force Katrina responsible for coordinating military relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina-affected areas across the Gulf Coast in 2005, he made headlines nationwide when he told reporters not to get “stuck on stupid” a reference to their continued peppering of him with questions about the government response to Hurricane Katrina when Hurricane Rita was about to strike. Sometimes others will have more crucial questions to ask, so shut up and listen.

Until next time. . . Brett A. Magbee, Vice President for Operations

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