



Guide to Writing Unbiased Questions*

Are your Voters' Guide Questions as Unbiased as you Think?

In the fall of 2016, it was brought to our [LWVUS] attention that some Leagues' questions for their voters' guides were either biased or leading in their wording, potentially undermining our organization's ability to produce quality voter engagement programs and partnerships. This How-To guide was created to help Leagues develop unbiased questions for their voters' guides in the future.

When surveyed after the 2016 General Election, most Leagues responded that they did not receive any negative feedback on their voters' guide questions from either candidates or voters. However, upon closer inspection, LWVEF was able to find many questions that were either biased or leading in many League voters' guides. It is possible that while candidates may not be complaining to the League about the questions, many are simply choosing not to participate in our voters' guides because of presumed bias.

Examples: What are biased or leading questions?

Biased and leading questions are those that are written in such a way that one answer appears to be favored over another: These questions often provide extra information that may influence the respondent in one way or another or the reader's view of the respondent's answer. It is vitally important that Leagues do not use biased questions in their voters' guides. These examples are based on actual League voters' guides:

| Biased/Leading Question | Unbiased/Non-Leading Question |
|---|--|
| What will you do to continue to support our recently thriving U.S. economy? | What will you do to support a vibrant economy across the U.S.? |
| Many people are streaming into our country illegally, taking jobs from American citizens. Do you support a pathway to citizenship for these individuals? | What, if any, actions will you support to create a pathway to citizenship? |
| Ever since the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, the amount of money invested in American elections has skyrocketed, ultimately reducing the influence of millions of voters across the country. Do you think it is important to reduce the role money plays in American elections? | Please explain why you do or do not think it is important to reduce the role of money in American elections. |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>In light of the high gun related deaths in our state and the fact that nearly 75% of residents support common sense gun laws, would you support changing the laws to limit the availability of semi-automatic assault weapons and expanding background checks?</p> | <p>Please explain why you do or do not support changing the laws to limit the availability of semi-automatic weapons.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Please explain why you do or do not support expanding background checks for gun purchases?</p> <p>OR</p> <p>What changes to the gun laws in our state would you support or oppose?</p> |
| <p>Recent studies of societal cost in dollars of mass incarceration has shown the likelihood of being tangled in the criminal justice system. Non-violent crimes or simply the inability to pay a traffic fine can ultimately end with incarceration and a criminal record, impairing one's ability to get or keep a job. What are ways that you would propose reforming the criminal justice system in our state? And, do you favor the use of private prisons if it can be seen as a cheaper alternative to state run prisons? Why or why not.</p> | <p>How would you reform the criminal justice system in our state?</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Please explain why you do or do not favor the use of private prisons over state run prisons.</p> |
| <p>The U.S. Department of Education plays a critical role in providing funding for quality public education and ensuring that children, no matter their socio-economic status or school district receive an equal education. Would you support getting rid of the U.S. Department of Education? Why or why not?</p> | <p>Please explain the role you believe the federal government should play in public education and therefore the policies you would support or oppose.</p> |

Tips

- Focus on questions that are core to what voters in your area are immediately concerned about in the upcoming election, which may or may not align with League priorities. Providing voters with the information they are looking for to make an informed decision is our #1 priority. See also: <https://www.lwv.org/league-management/elections-tools/sample-questions-debates-and-voters-guides> for sample questions.
- Avoid the temptation to offer background information or opinions as a preamble to asking the question. Ask the question you want to ask without adding any additional information. Let the candidates answer the question as best they can, based off the question you're asking. The shorter the question the better.

- Be very careful with word choice. Changing one word in a question can make the question drastically different.
- Ask “What, if any, steps, [measures, policies] do you suggest to address homeless...” questions. This avoids giving the appearance that the question has a specific opinion.
- Ask “Please explain why you do or don’t think...”
- Only ask one question at time. If you need to, ask a follow-up or second question instead of having too much information in one question.
- Even if the League has a position on a specific issue, do not include any of that information in the question to the candidates.