



## WHY NON-PARTISAN CANDIDATE GUIDES MATTER AND HOW TO USE THEM TO HELP STUDENTS VOTE

When students don't vote, it's often because they feel they don't know where the candidates stand, including because they mistrust the candidates in general. The national nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) (CEEP) was created to help colleges and universities involve their students in elections. When CEEP founder Paul Loeb was speaking a couple years ago, at Minnesota's Winona State, he asked students in a classroom point blank why they didn't vote. "I don't know enough," one woman said. "All the ads, all the lies, you can't believe what the candidates say, and I don't want to vote for the wrong person," something I hear again and again. "If I only had a list where I could see what they actually stood for..."

"Well actually," Loeb said, "we're creating lists exactly like that." He described the [nonpartisan candidate guides](#) that CEEP has been creating and distributing since 2012, as part of our overall effort to register students, help them reflect on issues, and get them to turn out at the polls. The student and her peers said lists like these could make all the difference to them in whether or not they vote.

Two days later, Loeb spoke at Viterbo, a Catholic university in La Crosse Wisconsin. Again he asked why students do and don't vote. "Students don't vote," said one, "because it takes a lot of effort to find out what the candidates stand for." Another then said, "It really helped last year when there was a printed list in everyone's mailbox and you could go down the list and see where the candidates stood on the issues." The other students enthusiastically agreed.

The professor coordinating the visit said they were CEEP's nonpartisan guides to the Presidential and Wisconsin Senate races from the previous year. After schools asked for a concise way to help students reflect on different candidates, we'd created the guides from sources like [Votesmart.org](#), [Vote411.org](#), [Ontheissues.org](#), [FactCheck.org](#), [Politifact.com](#), and from public candidate statements and stands, then cross-checked the stands extensively with major media. We'd sent the guides to Wisconsin Campus Compact, our local partner that works with schools on community service and civic engagement projects. They'd distributed it to all of their schools. The Viterbo administrators liked it so much, they printed several thousand copies and distributed them to all the student mailboxes on campus. When we've mentioned the guides to students at other schools they've had the same enthusiastic responses.

We're particularly proud to have a 2016 lead researcher who spent 19 years as a senior editor and manager at Encyclopedia Britannica, and who is working in tandem with the former Associate Director of

the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. When we surveyed our participating schools in the wake of 2014, not a single one rated our guides less than 8 on a 10-point scale. So we feel confident that they're a strong and useful tool to help students and other citizens past the reflex response of "they're all the same. They're all just lying and spinning."

Here are some ways to distribute our guides—or any others you feel that are useful, like the guides the League of Women Voters guides creates for local candidates and statewide initiatives:

- Encourage your student newspaper to use them as a starting point for their election coverage, highlighting the impact elected officials can make in student lives. Students may not read outside newspapers, but they do read their campus paper, and if that paper makes the election salient, there's a far greater likelihood that students will participate.
- As discussed in our guide [for how student newspapers can help engage their campuses](#), these campus newspapers can do a huge amount to thoughtfully cover candidates beyond just following the horse race, or covering campus visits. We'd be delighted if they used our guide as a start, either printing as an insert or elaborating on its themes. Various schools have done both, and the earlier you get the guides to the student paper, the more likely they'll be able to help galvanize their engagement.
- Post them prominently on your school's election-related website. You can then link to them through other electronic outreach.
- Get digital: Distribute them through all-campus email and social media outlets. Millennials love to spread ideas online, so distribute a link to the guides via social media networks, text-blasts, and use creative approaches like chalking your campus with links. If you can track views and let us know, we'd appreciate it.
- Distribute printed copies of the guides in students' physical mailboxes, as Viterbo did. Or have student volunteers hand them out as part of your nonpartisan voter engagement effort. Make them a starting-point for campus conversations.
- Distribute them and use them to help spark discussions in classrooms and residence halls. The goal is not to get agreement. It's to get students weighing in and talking about how their own values and political stands relate to those of the candidates.
- Think big: Blow the guides up in posters large enough to be visible to passing students. Display in high-traffic areas of the student union, classroom buildings, or residence halls. It's an inexpensive way to get major visibility.
- Create your own nonpartisan guides to down-ballot races, like Secretary of State, Attorney General, Congressional and local legislative races, and local and statewide initiatives. Have students draw up these guides under the supervision of political science, communications, or honors faculty, or have the faculty create them. Distribute them in the campus, community, and online as you would the CEEP guides.
- If your local League of Women Voters is creating guides to national, state, or local election, or any other nonpartisan groups, promote and distribute them as well. Direct students to some of the websites we use to put them together, like [Countable.us](#), [Votesmart.org](#), [Vote411.org](#), [OntheIssues.org](#), [FactCheck.org](#), [Politifact.com](#),
- Add your own creative ideas, and let CEEP know so we can pass them on. Use the guides to create reflection however you can.

One more note on the guides: Particularly where we've done guides for down-ballot races, there are some categories which we've marked Answer Unknown, Unclear, or No Response Found. These are areas where we simply couldn't find an answer for one of the candidates, sometimes because one candidate had the chance to vote on a particular issue and the other didn't. But you can still be proactive and ask candidates yourselves on their stands, ask your campus newspaper to do so, or look for additional coverage. And if you do get an answer for a guide we've created, please let your state CEEP staffer know, so they can update the guides for other schools in your state.