

Creating your own nonpartisan candidate guides: Adapting CEEP's approach



Each election cycle, our national nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) (CEEP) creates [candidate guides](#) to help students sort through candidate stands and make their own choices on who to support.

We've gotten wonderful responses from our campuses, and students love the concise [one-page double-sided format](#) that allows them to easily skim and compare. But since we don't have the staff time to create guides for more than about 40 races per cycle, we'd love to see schools adapting our format and approach to create their own guides for other races, which can also be a terrific learning opportunity. You could do this through your student newspaper; through political science, political communications, or sociology classes; or through relevant disciplinary clubs, like the Political Science and Law Association. As long as you do a fair and accurate job, you'll find a receptive audience.

In terms of format, you'll probably want to replicate our one-page 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. We've created a specific resource on ways [to distribute our guides](#), and recommend using it to help distribute yours.

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES

For issues to cover, you could start by using or adapting questions from [the guides we've created](#). For each race, we select 20-25 of the most salient policy issues and frame yes/no questions about them. For national races, like congressional races, most will be similar to those we used for the 2016 U.S. Senate races.

State and local races will feature many similar issues but will also differ in some important ways. So, for those, you will want to look at our gubernatorial and other state-level guides. For instance, education policy is highly important in a state race, but less so in national races, and you may also have specific local issues or ballot measures that candidates have weighed in on.

For example, in one of our Virginia gubernatorial guides, we asked whether candidates supported the extension of the DC Metrorail further into suburban Virginia, which was an important and contested state issue, but obviously irrelevant to other states.

DOCUMENTING YOUR RESEARCH

Although for some candidate stands you can find an easy and straightforward yes or no, for many you'll have to search multiple resources and wade through partial, confusing, or contested information. When CEEP researchers work on guides, they first create a Word document with questions they're researching and use it to take extensive notes that include source links, relevant text segments, and any questions they might have. These notes are invaluable to:

- Provide a central location for gathering and reviewing information, quotes, links, etc.
- Prevent repetitive searching for the same information or sources.
- Make it easy for other researchers or editors on your team to review what you find and check each other's work for accuracy.
- Provide documented sources for your answers if they're challenged by candidates or campaigns.

Since space is always at a premium, you may also want to create a template, perhaps from one of CEEP's existing guides, where you can enter your answers as you go and see if they'll all fit.

RESEARCHING YOUR ANSWERS

Most of CEEP's information for our guides comes from mainstream media searches. That means 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 candidates stand.

That said, there are several websites that also compile reliable candidate stands and that can potentially save you time or serve as additional resources to double-check stands. (These websites may be less useful if you are covering a strictly local race, but are worth checking nonetheless.)

[VoteSmart.org](https://www.votesmart.org) does lots of useful research, vets positions carefully, and should be the first source you check. However, their format can be difficult to access, particularly for cross-candidate comparisons. They also often wait until close to the election for candidates to fill out their questionnaires, which they call the Political Courage Test. Because most candidates are advised not to fill out questionnaires these days, VoteSmart can end up having considerably less info than one might expect. They also sometimes use information from questionnaires completed years ago, including on issues like gay rights and marijuana where many political stands have changed. Despite these limitations, VoteSmart remains an excellent source, and we always check to see what they have.

[Ontheissues.org](https://www.ontheissues.org) has concise and accessible summaries. But they vary in how up-to-date they are. So be sure to note the date on their summaries and be careful about using outdated stands. They do tend to provide credible links for the stands they list, which makes it easy to follow their links upstream.

[Vote411.org](https://www.vote411.org) is produced by the [League of Women Voters](https://www.leagueofwomen.org), 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 your school), and may include both candidate statements (subject, of course their own personal spin) and excellent information on ballot initiatives.

[Factcheck.org](https://www.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.

[Ballotready.org](https://www.ballotready.org) may have useful information available if they've covered the particular race you're interested in, though their current coverage is more limited. If you don't see links for their answers, you'll again want to check them upstream.

You'll of course also want to check candidate campaign sites. They can definitely be useful as an indication of their stands. But you want to remain mindful that they're vehicles to advance their candidacies and can often contain lots of platitudes. So if their site provides information that is relevant to your research, you still need to check it against mainstream media sources to see if they're spinning or shading their positions. And you don't want to rely on them for claims about opponents. The same is true for candidate social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

TIPS & CAUTIONS

Length of Answers

Whenever possible, structure your questions so that they can be answered with a simple Yes/No answer. That will make them easy to skim and also allow them to fit into the available space. You may also want to excerpt a well-chosen quote from the candidate.

Sometimes you do need to provide more than a yes or no. On gun issues, a candidate may support expanded background checks but oppose regulation of semi-automatic weapons. 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. In these kinds of cases, including the additional specificity is important.

Because space in the main template is limited, you can use endnotes to add details or additional references at the end of the guide. You can also use hyperlinked source text or quotes, although you should assume that most readers won't click on a quote, so the core answer you present should be clear at a quick glance. You can look at some of [our existing guides](#) for how we've handled these kinds of challenges.

When information is unavailable or problematic

If you're unable to find a credible answer, you can say "Position Unknown." If you're unable to find a credible answer for either candidate on any particular question, we suggest dropping the question.

Although we suggest certain questions in our templates, you can always revise the questions to highlight relevant areas where candidates genuinely disagree. So if they have clear and contrasting answers on assault weapons but not on background checks, or vice versa, use the answers you find to revise your question, and don't worry about including every facet of a particular issue. The goal is to let readers compare and contrast the real differences in political stands.

When you find information that's confusing or appears to be contradictory, you can usually get to the bottom of it with some serious searching. If you're still unable to determine the candidate's actual position, you can say "Position unclear," perhaps clarifying the contradictory answers with an endnote.

Sometimes a candidate may claim to take a particular stand, while their opponents say it's belied by previous stands or by the track record of their actions, like whether they have or haven't supported expanded state aid to education. Further searching may clarify this, and [Factcheck.org](#) may also offer useful context. If a position is truly contested, you can simply state that, while providing a link to [Factcheck.org](#)'s analysis, or to the mainstream sources that discuss the discrepant views.

Temptations to avoid

Remember that students may be choosing who to vote for based on the answers you provide, so accuracy is critical. You therefore want to avoid the following 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 always want to check additional sources if possible. Your search for these additional sources will often help you provide a more accurate or more nuanced answer. (Sometimes you may think you've found an additional source, but it's a secondary source that quotes the same original.)

Guessing based on the candidate's overall leanings. It can be tempting to assume, for instance, that if a candidate opposes or supports climate change regulations because of their position on the legitimacy of government regulation, they'll also oppose or support regulations on guns. And that often is true. But you can't extrapolate from one position to another. Again, you may not find answers for all questions. So you should feel free to change your questions to highlight answers that are available. But be wary of assuming that just because a candidate takes one stand, they'll also take another stand that seems related.

Losing objectivity. You may find yourself strongly supporting or objecting to a particular candidate and their views. That's fine, but you then have to be extra careful to maintain your objectivity in terms of providing accurate answers, whatever your personal reactions to the candidates or their stands. When in doubt about whether you've been fair and accurate in a particular answer, re-read it, re-check your sources, and ask another researcher to review it.

DOUBLE-CHECKING YOUR WORK

For CEEP guides, we start with individual researchers. They then turn in drafts and notes to our editors, who make the final judgments to make sure everything is accurate. Whatever method you establish for double-checking your work, you always want to have more than one person's eyes looking over the conclusions and checking upstream on the links you've provided in the notes. If you're doing this as a class or organization, we highly recommend that a professor or faculty advisor give the resource a final skim.

SHARING GUIDES WITH CANDIDATE CAMPAIGNS

Researchers creating these kinds of guides often wonder whether they should give their 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. As mentioned, most campaigns typically won't complete questionnaires, and you'll waste valuable time waiting for them to do so, delaying your distribution in the process. They'll also often spin their answers, leaving you with the task of rewriting them anyway.

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, making far less of an impact than it would have otherwise. After learning similar lessons the hard way, we've shifted to doing our own research from public sources.

It's fine to show the final draft of your guide to campaigns, but we also suggest that you only share 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, and be willing to distribute it without their feedback if they don't respond within this time-frame. If you're clear about your deadline, and they don't respond by then, it's their responsibility and not yours. If they want you to change an answer, be watchful for potential spin in their suggested change. It's legitimate if they flag inaccurate answers, but you're not asking them

for fine-tune editing or language that they believe will present their candidate more favorably. Never give them veto power over the phrasing or framing of your answers.

You can also show the guides to candidate supporters. For instance, in the highly polarized 2014 Wisconsin Governor's race between Scott Walker and Mary Burke, we showed our draft guides to both the University of Wisconsin Madison Young Republicans and UWM Young Democrats. Both gave us quick responses and said they were fair and accurate, which is exactly what we hope for with all our guides.

Good luck in creating your guides. It takes work, but is a powerful way to have an impact.

For more information and CEEP guide examples see: campuselect.org/guides.html

Contact CEEP [here](#) if you need further assistance.

If you do create your own guides, we'd appreciate you crediting us for the model and template but making clear that these guides are your own creation. Here's an example of language used by the University of Kentucky political science class for the gubernatorial guide they created:

Created by Trey Zimmerman, in collaboration with the University of Kentucky's Honors 251: Citizen Kentucky course. Created using the model and guidance of the Campus Election Engagement Project, Campuselect.org, a national non-partisan effort to have university administrators, faculty, and student leaders engage their schools in elections. Key sites consulted included Votesmart.org, Ontheissues.org, and FactCheck.org.

If you did contact the campaigns, you'd want to add something like "Also, each campaign was contacted for input."