

Bennington Banner

Linda Joy Sullivan: 'Tis the season: Voter beware

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By Linda Joy Sullivan,

I do not have a race this campaign season, so between my regularly held meetings with voters and participating in issue forums, I have had time to be more attentive to how candidates at the local, state and national level present themselves and the strategies they use to advance their campaigns. Fortunately, we in Vermont don't have to suffer the excessive rhetoric and appeals to emotional and polarizing themes that mark many races around the country. Instead, by and large, we get to decide races on the merits of the positions and experience of our candidates and not strictly on party affiliation and the results of single-issue litmus tests. Of course, that puts a premium on our listening attentively to what prospective elected officials say.

Here are a few suggestions that might be helpful in weighing the strengths of candidates for your legislative seats:

Beware of "sloganeers": Candidates often must, while out campaigning, resort to shorthand communication, pro or con, as to where they come out on individual issues. Some websites and campaign material also just lay out a candidate's platform of positions. Of course, that's important data, but I think that what is more instructive is not an initial statement of position, but the second, third and fourth sentence that follows: Is the position thoughtful and studied, acknowledging and respecting competing policy considerations? Does it recognize that the choice may have consequences, in terms of resource allocations or other policy implications? Is the position grounded on sound reasoning or does it seem embraced as just another politically appropriate 'flavor of the day'? All too often I see, sadly, that legislators on both sides of the aisle are content simply to follow voting cues from party leadership without independent analysis. Legislating, done right, is hard work. Is your candidate equipped and willing to do the work?

Beware of certain endorsements: Endorsements by special interest organizations are often a useful barometer. Many voters do not know, however, that endorsements are not always — or even often — earned as a result of an organization's independent review of the voting record of candidates or by the public positions expressed by them. Rather, many organizations require candidates to complete questionnaires and applications that affirmatively require the candidate to commit in advance to support the legislative agenda of the organization. In my mind, "bargaining" one's future vote in exchange for a favorable endorsement is on par with bargaining one's vote in exchange for a campaign contribution. A candidate who has collected too many endorsements from special interest groups may well be a candidate who is effectively hamstrung from doing the work we expect of legislators. I personally stay away from organizations offering endorsements.

Beware of identity politics: It is important to know the personal life background and experiences of a candidate. I know first-hand that cultural, ethnic, professional and educational diversity in the legislature serves us all well. It is also important in my mind to know that every candidate who is elected will genuinely and vigorously work to protect the civil rights of all Vermonters and to improve the well-being of the needy or disadvantaged. Beyond that, I am generally blind as to gender, ethnicity, race, or the sexual or gender orientation of a candidate. I worry about platforms that, while not mutually inconsistent, predominate themes around personal identity to the potential de-emphasis of policy objectives focused on doing what's right for Vermont as a whole. Stated otherwise, my lodestar is improving the plight of Vermonters, and advancing their economic opportunities and our collective prosperity, while protecting individual rights and all that's right and good about this beautiful state.

Beware of clever voting strategies: This concern is unique to that part of our Vermont electoral system applicable to districts and counties having more than one elected position allocated to the House or Senate. In those districts voters may have two, three or more votes for a large slate of candidates. I have heard some advocates who prefer a particular candidate encourage voters to engage in "bullet voting" for the favored candidate — that is, to vote only for the preferred candidate and to discard one's second or third vote in order to deprive all of the less favored candidates the possibility of getting the second or third vote. The risk is, of course, that by voting for only one candidate one runs the risk of voting for a candidate that doesn't prevail — effectively disenfranchising oneself entirely. In a two-seat race, exercising your vote fully, and using all of your votes, will result in at least contributing to the election of one or maybe both of the legislators who prevail. In 2018 we can't afford to throw away votes. It is important that people actually go to the polls and exercise their rights fully so that we can send the best team of representatives to Montpelier.

Linda Joy Sullivan is a state representative from the Bennington-Rutland district, representing Dorset, Peru, Landgrove, Danby and Mt. Tabor.