

Make Your Voice Heard -- *continued*

On April 4, 2017, municipal elections will be held across the State of Illinois. These include races for city councils and mayors, township supervisors, park district boards, library district boards, community college boards and school district boards. Most of the races in central Illinois are contested.

With today's focus on diversity, the easiest level of government in which to attain diverse representation is at the local level. Consider the races in Peoria. This article was written before the February 28th primary, but among the candidates were men and women, black and white, Christian and Muslim. In fact, with a white male, white female and black male on the primary ballot for mayor, we are assured to have at least one candidate in the general election who is not a white male. Being a member of a minority group does not ensure election, but neither does being a white male.

At every level of government, it is the citizens' obligation to study the candidates and determine who would best represent their interests. How is that possible when local candidates often do not have the financial backing to run television and radio ads? Here in the Peoria area, there are several ways to learn about the individuals running for office.

First, most candidates have websites that list their qualifications and other things they want voters to know about them. They often have flyers listing the same type of information, and many hold "meet and greets" or "town hall meetings" to allow voters to get to know them on a more personal level.

To acquire more balanced knowledge, voters must look for information that includes more than one candidate for the office in question. Local newspapers often carry the answers to questionnaires and interviews with those candidates. Finally, the League of Women Voters and other civic organizations hold candidate forums in which questions important to the audience can be answered by those who want their votes.

One problem that has begun to occur more frequently has to do with incumbents, who may not always participate in these forums or even answer the questionnaires. This happens at all levels of government. Typically, the incumbent will say he or she has a previous engagement, but the League of Women Voters always asks candidates to participate well in advance. Unless the candidate (or someone close) has suddenly taken ill—which does occasionally happen—this lack of participation feels like a slap in the face of voters. Would you rather vote for candidates who are willing to tell you what they really think, or those who feel they have nothing to gain by doing so?

I personally have never run for office—that is not my strength. I have, however, been a member of the League of Women Voters since 1970, and I have watched many candidates run for office. For the past three and a half years, I have either chaired or co-chaired the Voter Service Committee of the League of Women Voters of Illinois, the statewide organization that brought both the Republican primary and general election forums for governor to Peoria and the Chicago area in 2013. This year, the League of Women Voters of Greater Peoria held forums before the primaries in both Peoria and Tazewell counties. Watch for news of more forums before the April 4th elections, show up, and ask the questions that you want answered. Make your voice heard!

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