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## **Sue Lani Madsen: Deciding who to vote for isn't easy, but don't let that stop you**

**Sue Lani Madsen/SR**

How will you decide who earns your vote? It isn't any easier to discriminate fairly between candidates now than it was two centuries ago.

Everyone claims to hate it, but negative campaigning works. Mudslinging goes back to when there may have been real mud involved; in 1828, there were attacks on Andrew Jackson's military record, his wife's untimely divorce and his mother's ostensible profession as a prostitute. John Quincy Adams was accused of stealing the 1824 election and pimping for Czar Alexander I. Actual mud would have been an improvement.

Negative campaigning works on fear, and uncontrolled fear is a poor decision driver.

Even if you are one of the approximately 60 percent of American voters who identify closely with a political party, you still have to make a decision in the primaries. That includes the presidential primary in Washington, with ballots due to be dropped off or postmarked by May 24th. In Idaho, the primary election for state and local offices is Tuesday, with polls open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Washington voters won't know how many contested state and local primaries they will face until the end of candidate filing week on May 20th, but it's shaping up to be a hot August primary election.

There are many poor reasons to discriminate. In the 6th grade we had an election for class president with two candidates – a boy and a girl. The vote fell along partisan lines for 12-year-olds: there were more boys than girls in the classroom, so the boy won.

Party labels, gender, name familiarity, placement on the ballot and catchy marketing shouldn't matter, but they commonly influence the outcome.

Voting by party label is a handy shortcut, but it doesn't mean as much as most people think. Even before the "top two" primary in Washington, candidates merely listed the party they preferred. There's never been a vetting process by political parties before a candidate files for office in Washington or Idaho. Anyone who wants to win in Spokane's 3rd Legislative District might just "Prefer Democratic" during filing week, even if they were partying with the Republicans the week before.

The mantra of the independent voter is “I vote for the person, not the party.” It’s the motivation for candidates to sweat it out all summer doorbelling to make face-to-face connections. But what if you never meet the candidates personally?

Experts on campaign strategy teach the bell curve of political participation: At each end of the bell curve are those who vote by party based on shared issues and principles. The moderate, independent voters in the middle of the bell curve tend to be more interested in resume and character. Yellow Dog Democrats, those who would vote for a yellow dog before they’d vote for a Republican, are in the hard-left partisan category. The equally partisan Republicans on the right lack a colorful nickname.

If you are driven by principles or passionate about specific issues, write out your personal platform and prioritize it. Check the platforms of each party and candidate’s statements, all readily found online. Seek out those most welcoming to your worldview who will champion your highest priorities, or most of them.

Judging the person is tougher when relying on third-hand reports. George Washington was idolized at the start of his first term, but by the end of four years he faced an aggressively partisan press as the newspaper age exploded and each editor fought for an audience. The indiscriminate proliferation of 21st century media is no different. Be discerning. No one source is without human bias – it takes a media village to find a fair and balanced picture.

But first, you have to decide to participate. A neighbor once told me he’d stopped voting years ago “because it only encourages them.” His worldview was fatalistic. He believed he had little control over his life and therefore over his government. I gave him the same advice my father often repeated: If you don’t vote, you don’t get to complain.

I plan to keep complaining in 2017.

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