

TIPS ON HOW TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL BIRD-DOGGER

These tips are especially useful for bird-dogging candidates for elected office, but they can also be adapted for current, elected officials from whom you seek public statements about their position on the SOA/ WHINSEC.

- ❖ **ARRIVE EARLY:** this is especially important if the candidate is very popular, leading in the polls, or if it is late in the primary season. Make sure you sit close enough and are within the candidate's line of sight. You may have to speak with the organizers in advance about getting your name on a list to ask a question.
- ❖ **PREPARE YOUR QUESTION:** review the SOA Watch talking points and history of the issue (contact the DC office for the latest talking points). You can use your question to briefly provide background on the issue while making sure the question is brief, fact based and direct. Practice with other people, having them play "devil's advocate" with the best questions/challenges to your argument. You'll quickly discover that many questions that you once thought were great can be quickly sidetracked or outright dismissed by a savvy politician.
- ❖ **ASK YOUR QUESTION EARLY:** at events with a question and answer period most people in the audience will not raise their hand immediately. If you ask right away, you are more likely to be called on.
- ❖ **GET READY TO SHAKE HANDS:** candidates often walk through the crowd shaking hands and pausing for brief conversations. Be ready for these one-on-one opportunities by positioning yourself in the candidate's path.
- ❖ **WORK AS A TEAM AND DISPERSE:** split up into teams of two throughout the crowd and have one person ask the question while another writes down the candidate's response. This allows the person asking the question to focus and connect with the candidate and not be distracted by trying to get an accurate note of the response. Be prepared to ask a follow-up question if you feel like the candidate dodged a question or you want more details. Also, come prepared with more than one question, as someone may ask your question before you get the chance.
- ❖ **KNOW THE CANDIDATE'S POSITION:** ask a question that shows you know something about the candidate's position, and that you want to know more. Don't waste your opportunity by asking a "softball" question, but choose a topic that you want him or her to take action on and formulate a question on that topic.
- ❖ **BE CALM AND REASONABLE:** maintaining a respectable tone will bring a more positive response from the candidate and their staff. Getting angry, sarcastic, or emotional will generally result in being ignored, belittled, or dismissed. You can even preface your question with a comment on something the candidate has done well to set the candidate at ease, before proceeding to your question.
- ❖ **TAKE NOTES:** the only way to track the record and positions of candidates is to have an accurate record of what they said. It is also helpful to have notes when you are trying to frame a follow-up question. Having a record of their position ensures that you can make sure they follow through on promises to close the SOA/ WHINSEC if elected. Remember: making them accountable for their words and actions is an integral part of effective bird-dogging.
- ❖ **BE PREPARED TO SPEAK WITH THE MEDIA:** generally speaking, journalists like to speak to folks who have asked the candidate a question. Remember to stay on message when talking to reporters by talking about the issue that is important to you. Don't be afraid to approach reporters even if they have not approached you. Try positioning yourself next to a reporter and strike up a conversation, again remembering to stay on message.
- ❖ **BE CREATIVE AND IMPROVISE WHEN NECESSARY:** being a bird-dog is not just about asking questions. Street theatre, or even a simple picket sign, can raise public and candidate awareness on key issues. These tactics are especially helpful at events where you are prevented from entering or if you are a bird-dogger who is well known to the candidate or his or her staff. But remember the objective is to get a response, either getting information you can use later or something that the media will pay attention to.
- ❖ **SHARE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED:** after the event is over, pass on to others what you have learned by using your own email lists, contacting the SOA Watch DC office, and submitting a report to sites such as www.birddogger.org.