

with Adam Schrager Producer/Reporter, Wisconsin Public Television



**GOAL: To give people the tools to be their own political truth seekers.**

- 1) Transcribe the entire ad
  - a) Questions that should be considered include
    - i. Who paid for the ad?
    - ii. Does it attack or promote anyone specifically?
  - b) Don't forget graphics
    - i. This is often the "evidence" for what's being claimed in the ad. Examples include media report, Legislative votes, Candidate statements, Other websites
    - ii. Graphics can also differ from what's being said in a commercial.
- 2) Define statements or claims, specifically are they cited as fact or as opinion? Facts are checkable (i.e. Candidate A voted for a property tax hike). Opinions are debatable. (i.e. Candidate A voted for the worst property tax hike in history).
- 3) Understand campaign finance law and how it relates to who's funding this expression of political speech
  - a) Knowing donors vs. not knowing donors
    - i. If you hear an ad asking you to "vote for" or "vote against" Candidate A, you likely can find out who's paying for that commercial. (Political Action Committees—PACs, Super PACs, 527s—they're all registered in the part of the federal tax code that requires the disclosure of donors. You will also be able to find out who donated directly to a candidate themselves.
    - ii. If you hear an ad asking you to "call" Candidate A and tell them "*fill in the blank*," that's code for "You likely won't find out who's paying for the ad." (These groups operate under the 501(c) part of the federal tax code that regulates non-profit organizations. Specifically, 501(c)4 organizations can engage in political activity provided their primary mission is "social welfare." 501(c)5 organizations generally cover labor unions, 501(c)6 organizations deal with "business interests." All of these organizations can keep their donors private.)
  - b) Donation limits vary
    - i. For individuals, there are \$1,000 limits on giving directly to a candidate for governor in Wisconsin. That limit is \$2,500 to a candidate for federal office and \$2,500 in a primary and a general election cycle for a presidential candidate.
    - ii. For corporations, unions and other individuals who want to participate in a Super PAC or 527-type group, there are no limits on donations because of the 2010 Citizens United decision from the U.S. Supreme Court. Again, those donors must report their contributions. Those aforementioned entities that choose to fund political activity through 501(c) groups will not have their names or contributions disclosed.

- 4) The internet is your friend
  - a) Legislative records are on line from Wisconsin since 1995: <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/>
  - b) Congressional records are on line since 1989: <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php>. They can be somewhat difficult to understand (<http://www.govtrack.us/> is a site that can help decipher the legislative jargon.
  - c) Wisconsin campaign finance records are also publicly viewable for free.
    - i. The Campaign Finance Information System is run by the Governmental Accountability Board: <http://cfis.wi.gov/> (Difficult to navigate)
    - ii. The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign Database: <http://www.wisdc.org/index.php?module=cms&page=12>
    - iii. National Institute on Money in State Politics: <http://www.followthemoney.org/>
  - d) Federal campaign finance records are also available.
    - i. The Center for Responsive Politics: <http://www.opensecrets.org/>
    - ii. The Sunlight Foundation: <http://influenceexplorer.com/>
    - iii. Project Vote Smart: <http://votesmart.org/>
- 5) Search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo) are also your friend—When in doubt, literally type it out. The political world is not always the most creative. Sometimes, an attack against a Congressional candidate in Wisconsin is also being used in other states against other candidates. Searching the exact wording in a commercial on a search engine can reveal that detail.
- 6) Other interesting political sites for specific purposes
  - a) Patchwork Nation (<http://www.patchworknation.org/>) helps cut through descriptions of red and blue, West vs. East, etc. by providing demographic and geographic political information about communities through the whole country.
  - b) Real Clear Politics (<http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>) aggregates all the publicly-released polls on particular political races.
  - c) Journalist's Tool Box (<http://www.journaliststoolbox.org/archive/electionspolitics/>) produced by the Society of Professional Journalists is a nice aggregator of websites dedicated to political coverage.
- 7) Be a skeptic. Skepticism means you are inquisitive. Ask questions of those advertising in your homes. Seek answers from those wanting your support. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."

POSTED IN ITS ENTIRETY ON: <http://wisconsinvote.org/>