

POLITICAL ENDORSEMENTS

The Give and The Get

If politics were a commercial market, endorsements would be a product whose value and cost depended on the producer and consumer. What is the endorser's worth (the 'give') and what are candidates willing to buy, or say (the 'get')?

Put simply, how do endorsements affect an election? How do voters respond?

Santa Monica civic organizations likely to make political endorsements are a diverse lot, from newspapers to unions, non-profits to political parties, local civic, commercial and business interests to regional subsidiaries of state and national movements. Whether their endorsements include candidates or are limited to ballot measures, internal processes – vetting mechanisms and decision-making – are not appreciably different among them.

Some have a readily identifiable 'dog in the hunt'. UniteHere, the Local 11 union representing hotel workers, supports hotel construction that will employ its members. The Santa Monica Police Association and SM Firefighters Local 1109 and city employees have direct interests in City Council candidates who will enhance and protect wages, pensions, and job security.

Community organizations – Residocracy, Santa Monicans for a Livable City (SMCLC), and Santa Monicans for Renters Rights (SMRR) – have broad policy goals that sit along the pro/anti-development teeter-totter. Local newspapers sometimes weigh in, as may business-oriented organizations like Santa Monica Next, the Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Santa Monica, Inc., although as a prudent hedge, some will eschew candidate endorsements because they must work with whoever is elected. Non-profits like the seven city-sanctioned neighborhood groups face legal restrictions on endorsing candidates but may choose to voice opinions on ballot initiatives. The Sierra Club, Los Angeles County Democratic Committee, and Santa Monica Democratic Club bring a local perspective as part of larger national organizations. Political bigwigs – area mayors, county supervisors, and state representatives – sometimes endorse for their own labyrinthine motives.

Most organizations have boards of directors or steering committees that collectively conduct preliminary evaluations of candidates and measures before sending questionnaires and invitations for interviews. Some keep endorsement decisions at the highest level of hierarchy; others drill down to solicit membership views.

Arguably the most 'democratic' – meaning a tallied vote of all attending members – are Santa Monicans for Renters Rights and the Santa Monica Democratic Club. In both organizations, advisory boards make membership recommendations, which might be followed by members, or not. Both sometimes grapple with the transparency of open membership votes amidst howls that a particular candidate or interest group has packed the endorsement session to sway the vote.

In a city with rapidly rising tourism, one of the largest per capita municipal budgets in the country, some of the most valuable real estate in the world, a citizenry that is 70% renters, and long-time residents in near revolt at downtown gridlock leaching into neighborhoods, the stakes are high for everyone.

For civic organizations that 'give', endorsements for individual or a slate of candidates and ballot initiatives are a powerful tool to effect the direction of municipal change. For candidates who 'get', endorsements illustrate their power to convince credible organizations that mutual support is beneficial, and publicly testifies to agreement on civic issues such as the environment, development and quality of life. Candidates love the visibility endorsements provide – and the reflected luster of officials higher in the political food chain – in hopes that they may affect votes, volunteers, and financial contributions.

Important as a source of publicity and credibility, endorsements are marginal in their capacity to change voter's minds. Except in closely fought elections, most voters view endorsements through a lens already focused, cherry-picking those that legitimize their instinctive or formed choices. In effect, an endorsement makes a voter feel better about a choice they already made.

For voters perusing ballot alternatives, a ringing endorsement from a credible organization that shares their views and values may be helpful, but political endorsements are like billboards - pithy and often splashy, but no substitute for the real thing: informed knowledge.

No endorsement can match the educated voter, one who has made the effort and taken the time to evaluate incumbent's records (YouTube is a treasure trove), pledges of challengers, and consequences of ballot measures.

Then please recycle the mailers and flyers – there will be lots.