



‘Shout out, do not
hold back! Lift up
your voice like a
trumpet!’
— Isaiah 58:1

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God is still speaking,
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



What is Bird-Dogging?

Accountability is one of the most important things to look for in a candidate for any office. One way to promote the issues you care about is to hold political hopefuls accountable to their promises. In so doing, we hope to find out where the candidates stand, shift the debate in the direction of peace and social justice, and raise public awareness. One way to do this is through bird-dogging.

According to the dictionary, a bird-dog is one of any of various breeds of dogs trained to hunt or retrieve birds. But it also can mean a person hired to locate special items or people. As a verb, “to bird-dog” means “to follow, watch carefully, or investigate.” We use the term to refer to activists who seek out the candidates, pin them down with specific questions or information, and retrieve their views. Once a candidate makes a public statement on an issue, we can better assess them as potential leaders and also hold them accountable for what they promise the public.

Tips for Bird-Dogs Attending Campaign Events and Public Forums

- **Arrive Early:** This is especially important if the candidate is very popular or leading in the polls. In situations where there is a question and answer period, it will be important for you to be close enough to the candidate so that you are in his or her line of sight.
- **Have Your Question Ready:** Get input from family and friends about the best way to frame a question. Practice asking the question. Make certain your question is brief, fact-based and direct.
- **Ask Your Question Early:** At events where there is a question and answer period, most people in the audience will not raise their hand immediately. If you indicate early interest, you are more likely to be called on.
- **Stick Your Hand Out:** Candidates often walk through the crowd shaking hands and pausing for brief conversations. Be ready for these one-on-one opportunities. Position yourself in the candidate’s path.
- **Work in Teams of Two or More and Disperse:** Since bird-dogging can make people nervous, it is good to go in teams of two or more people. One person asks the question while another writes down the candidate’s response. Dispersing at the event will improve the odds that more than one of your group will get to ask a question. Be prepared to ask a follow-up question if you think 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 Positions:** Ask a question that shows you know something about the candidate’s position and that you want to know more. Don’t miss an opportunity by asking a “softball” question, but choose a topic that you want him or her to address and formulate a question on that topic.

- **Be Calm and Reasonable:** Maintaining a respectful tone will bring a more positive response from the candidate, their staff, and the media, if they are present. Getting angry, sarcastic, or emotional will generally result in being ignored. You can even preface your question with a comment on something the candidate has done well before proceeding to your question.
- **Take Notes:** The only way to track the responses of candidates is to have a record of what they said. It is also helpful to have notes when you are trying to frame a follow-up question.
- **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. For example, if the reporter asks “What do you think of Senator Firefly?” you can respond, “I’d like him to say more about how he proposes to abolish nuclear weapons worldwide.” Don’t be afraid to approach reporters even if they have not approached you. Try positioning yourself next to a reporter and striking 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 well known to the candidate or his/her staff.
- **Share What You Have Learned:** After the event is over, pass on to others what you have learned by using your own email lists, writing an op-ed or letter to the editor and sharing it within your church community, particularly in the context of Our Faith Our Vote.

Good Bird-Dog Basics

Elements of a Good Question

- Focused on a particular issue
- Concise
- Puts candidates on the spot
- Informs whomever is listening, including reporters
- Incorporates personal anecdotes, local facts, candidate facts, e.g. reference to votes and quotes

Things to Avoid in a Question

- Softball questions, e.g. “what do you think about ...?”
- Rambling
- Multi-issue references
- Overly technical terms
- Unfamiliar acronyms

See the Our Faith Our Vote issue page for sample bird-dogging questions.

[Tips provided by: American Friends Service Committee, New Hampshire Program, Presidential Primary Project]