

Birddogging—raising the issues we care about

Birddogging sounds like a weird term, but it just means attending events with candidates for office and asking them about issues that you care about. **This could mean attending a debate, going to a ‘meet-and-greet’, calling into a radio program, responding to a post on Facebook, or writing a letter-to-the-editor.**

Birddogging is important because we need to show the people who will be making decisions that we care about these issues. Candidates and (once-elected) legislators hear from people all the time about a lot of different issues. Consistently showing up and asking about the issues we care about will tell them that this is an important issue for their district.

Birddogging also helps educate the audience and the media that attend the forums about the issue. If the media hears the question frequently, they are also more likely to report on it because they will know it matters their audience.

Candidates are more likely to respond to people in their district when they are trying to get their vote since every vote counts. Afterwards, once elected, they will be lobbied and asked to make deals with other legislators and it will be harder to get them to pay attention to our concerns. **Our goal is to get every candidate to commit to supporting us before Election Day.** Since our goal is to get them on our side, it’s very important we remain respectful.

STEPS TO BIRDDOG

- 1 Find an event**
- 2 Prepare & Attend**
- 3 Ask the question**

1. Find the candidates: you can’t ask a question if no one is there to ask it to! Remember, it doesn’t have to be an in-person event. Many radio stations host forums. **Here are ways to find them:**

- **Subscribe to a candidate’s email list or follow them on Facebook:** they want their supporters to attend events and support them, so you’ll likely hear from them about upcoming events. This is also true of state and local party (Republican and Democratic Party of Wisconsin) emails lists and Facebook pages. You can also just call a campaign office and ask where they will be! Often there isn’t much notice, so you have to check frequently. Don’t want to subscribe? Find someone who is already politically active and ask them to forward things along.
- **Follow local media on Facebook or read the news:** Many events are hosted by a local TV station or newspaper. Follow them to find out information. You can even reach out to the paper to ask if they know of anything. Often the papers also interview candidates before making endorsements or publish interviews. Reaching out to them might get you an opportunity to have one of the questions be about our issues. Wisconsin Public Radio interviews most candidates at some point throughout the election season, make sure to watch for those and call in to the show.
- **Check out entities that are likely to host a forum** like the League of Women Voters. If you can’t find anything online, reach out to them and ask. They often know of a forum or event, even if they aren’t putting it on.

Unique Opportunities- County Fairs and Farmer’s Markets

Some opportunities may not allow for a formal question to be asked, like a debate, so look for opportunities where the candidates will be, even if it’s not a forum. **Often candidates attend the local County Fairs or Farmer’s Markets.** Those are great places to ask a question and maybe get the opportunity for a full conversation. Some events may be planned to only allow you to shake the candidate’s hands as they walk by. Stick your hand out and ask the question or state your desires quickly—it’s better it’s quick than not at all!

Ranking of the best Birddogging Opportunities

1. Attending* a Debate or Forum

This is ideal because there is an entire room to hear them on record. They will also want to compete with the other candidate to show they are 'the most' on your side.

*or calling into a radio program

2. Talking 1-on-1

Attending a one-candidate-only event or seeking out a candidate at a fair or festival is great! It allows you to get them on record even if it's not in front of an audience. Just make sure you record their response!

3. Asking questions on Social Media

Candidates will often pose questions on their social media to understand what issues are important. Weighing in and asking your question is a good way to catch their attention.

4. Letters-to-the-Editor

If you are unable to get the candidates directly, writing a letter-to-the-editor calling on the candidates to respond to your concerns is a good way to draw attention to the issue.

2. Prepare and show up: If you're not there to ask the question, they won't answer it! Here are some important tips to make sure you get to ask your question:

- **Arrive early:** At some events, the room could be packed. If you don't arrive early and have to be in the back of the crowd, you may go unnoticed. Sometimes only one or two questions may be taken from the audience so getting there early and raising your hand immediately could be key.
- **Ask your question early:** people tend to be shy earlier in the evening, so you could be one of a few hands if you raise your hand immediately, compared to the end when everyone raises their hands. This also means that if the candidate doesn't directly answer your question, someone else has time to ask a follow-up question.
- **Figure out the process:** if you can do this before the event, that's even better. As soon as you get there, find out if questions from the audience will be taken and how (first person to raise their hands, sign up in advance, fill out a card, etc.) and get ready. It helps to figure out as much as possible in advance so you can prepare accordingly. If possible, reach out to the organizers in advance to ask them to make sure the candidates get asked your question.
- **Set yourself up for success:** you can increase your chance of getting called on if you dress nicely, sit up front, smile, and look pleasant and polite. They don't want to call on anyone they think will be aggressive. If there is a microphone in the aisle, sit near it.

3. Ask the question: there are sample questions at the bottom, but feel free to explain in your own words. You'll only be given time for a sentence or two, so make them count! **Make sure you ask a specific, yes-or-no question.** Politicians usually answer the question they hoped they were asked instead of the question they were asked. Asking a specific question that requires a 'yes' or 'no' answer will make it harder for them to pivot to a different topic.

- **Follow-Up questions:** It is possible you'll be given the opportunity to follow-up if they don't respond. Be ready to ask, "So are you saying you would support the legislation," etc. if they don't directly respond. You may not be able to do this, but be ready just in case.
- **Don't be intimidated:** they are looking for something from you (your vote), not the other way around. Their job is to work on issues that matter to their constituents.

Make sure to tell us what happened!

This is important so that if they are elected, we can remind them of what they said when a vote is approaching. It also gives people something to address in a letter-to-the-editor or fodder for the next forum. We can also learn from each other. Tell us what worked, how the event was formatted, etc.

Ask through the newspaper!

If there are not any forums or events, **writing a letter-to-the-editor** is a great way to ask the question publicly. Candidates watch the opinion sections very closely during election season to figure out how the district feels about certain issues and what issues matter most. Contact us for more information if you'd like to write a letter-to-the-editor. We can give you contact info for media near you, and editing help.

Here are some critical reminders and helpful tips:

- **Be calm and reasonable:** this can't be overstated; nothing will be gained by being confrontational or rude. Make sure your question doesn't come across like an accusation (like "why haven't you" or "I'm disappointed that you", etc.). The candidates will immediately get defensive and won't keep an open mind.
- **Ask even if you know the answer:**
 - **If the candidate has taken the wrong position in the past,** ask something like "in the past you've stated _____, but now that we know _____, would you be willing to support _____?"
 - **If you know the candidate is supportive,** it's still good to ask to remind them how important the issue is, not just to hear the right answer. It's also good education for the attendees.
- **Practice:** practice ahead of time. You'll likely be nervous with the candidates and every one watching you, so it's good to practice and be ready to make your point. Also practice following-up so if the candidate avoids answering the question, you have the opportunity to restate it again.
- **Bring a friend:** they'll offer moral support! Also, if two of you raise your hands, the chances one of you will get called on increases. If a candidate pivots away, your friend can be there to jump in with the follow-up questions.
- **Get it on record:** if the only opportunity you have is to ask the question at a fair or meet-and-greet so you and your friend are the only ones to hear the answer, make sure to have someone there to record them. (Just make sure this doesn't come off aggressive)
- **Be creative and improvise when necessary:** if you weren't able to ask your question make sure to be at the front of the line as they leave so you can ask them there. Or perhaps you were supposed to fill out a form but they are just taking questions from the audience? Jump in and raise your hand. You won't want to go home and later think of ways you could have made it happen.
- **Don't give a long introduction to your question:** you could end up getting cut off or the moderator could incorrectly summarize your question. The more explanation you give, the more things the candidate can speak to without really answering. Remember, the purpose of your question is to hear their response!

OPENING (Use this opening for whichever question you'd like to ask):

Enbridge was just granted permission to build a new pipeline in Minnesota that will bring oil into Superior. This likely means they will be starting the process to get permits and apply to use eminent domain for a new pipeline through Wisconsin. The oil will likely be exported, setting Wisconsin up to take the risk of having this pipeline with little benefit to us.

QUESTION FOR GOVERNOR:

Would you ensure that the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) completes a full, comprehensive environmental impact statement, including an analysis of the impacts of climate change, potential spills, and cultural and sacred sites and resources, and holding hearings in every county along the line before granting any permits?

QUESTION FOR LEGISLATORS:

Would you support legislation that forces Enbridge and other oil pipeline companies to get permission from landowners, tribal governments, and local communities (towns and county boards) before being granted any permits for the pipeline?

QUESTION FOR BOTH:

In 2015, Enbridge sought a change to Wisconsin's eminent domain law, making them eligible to use the government to take a Wisconsinite's land for their benefit, signaling plans to use eminent domain for the new pipeline. Would you work to reform eminent domain law so that a company cannot use eminent domain for an oil pipeline when the purpose is to make that company profit?

Sample Questions: