

First Choice 2004: Know *What You Want Before You Choose Who You Want*

1 Invest in making sure all students can attend college

2 Provide opportunity to the needy

3 Keep tuition down by making colleges more efficient



▶ *What's in This Guide*

Chicework: What Are the Options?	3
▶ Approach One: Invest in making sure all students can attend college	4
▶ Approach Two: Provide opportunity to the needy	5
▶ Approach Three: Keep tuition down by making colleges more efficient	6
Status Report: Where Are We Now?	7
Additional Resources	10

▶ *How to Use This Guide*

Most voters' guides compare the candidates. That's useful, but how can you decide who you want in office until you're sure about what you want that politician to do? And these days that's harder to figure out than it should be.

When politicians present their plans, they naturally play up the quick, easy, cheap part of their program and downplay the messy, expensive, risky parts. In reality, however, many problems don't get solved without facing harsh choices; the government can't avoid pleasing some people and offending others.

First Choice 2004 is designed to help you make the most of your vote by having strong, informed opinions about what those choices might be. With these guides, you can find out more about the problems facing the nation and weigh your values against the policies politicians put forward.

With First Choice 2004, we're not claiming to have the "correct" solution to a problem. What you'll

find here are some key facts along with three different points of view about how to address the issue. We call this section Chicework. Each point of view comes with the arguments for and against, along with some potential costs and tradeoffs. We focus on what each problem means to the average person – and because Public Agenda isn't pushing a particular solution, we're not interested in sugarcoating any options or trashing other points of view.

That doesn't mean, by the way, that the broad choices we present are the only ways of dealing with a problem. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, and you may have your own ideas we haven't considered. We're also not suggesting that you should go looking for a candidate who agrees with you on every single issue. What we are suggesting is that it'll be easier to judge the candidates if you've considered where you want the country to go in the next four years – and what you're willing to do to get there.



Originally launched in 1992, "Choose or Lose" is MTV's comprehensive pro-social campaign to inform young adults about the political process, voice their most urgent political concerns, compel leading Presidential candidates to address those concerns, and organize young adults aged 18-30 to register and vote. In 2004 the campaign is dubbed "20 Million Loud," a movement to mobilize more than 20 million people aged 18-30 to vote in the 2004 election.

You can find out more about Choose or Lose at our Web site, www.mtv.com.



Founded in 1975, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization devoted to public opinion and citizen education. Public Agenda's two-fold mission is to help American leaders better understand the public's point of view, while also helping citizens know more about critical policy issues so they can make thoughtful, informed decisions.

You can find out more about us at our Web site, www.publicagenda.org.

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Choicework In Brief: What Are the Options?

Approach One

Invest in Making Sure All Students Can Attend College

What should be done?

- ▶ Provide tax credits for college tuition
- ▶ Increase the number of federal grants to students
- ▶ Offer free or reduced tuition at state universities for high school students who maintain a high GPA
- ▶ Increase overall state spending on higher education

Arguments for this approach

- ✓ As a society, we have to invest in higher education: It's the best way of expanding economic and social opportunities. The more students who attend college, the better off our society will be.
- ✓ Middle-class students don't have much of a choice if they want a professional job in today's workforce: They have to find the money for higher education or they simply won't have any job prospects.

Arguments against this approach

- ✗ True, private colleges can be quite expensive, but on average, a state college costs less than one-quarter as much.
- ✗ Although college is expensive, middle-class families have lots of options to save or borrow for their children's education. Education dollars should be directed toward poor students.

Approach Two

Provide Opportunity to the Needy

What should be done

- ▶ Channel federal and state financial grants to students based on their economic need
- ▶ Increase state funding to community colleges, which often serve low-income students
- ▶ Work with inner-city high schools to ensure their curriculum prepares students for college
- ▶ Use affirmative action plans in making admissions decisions

Arguments for this approach

- ✓ Low-income students, even if they are academically prepared, still struggle to pay for college. They simply need more financial help than they're now receiving.
- ✓ Affirmative action not only helps minority students, it helps expose all college students to the diverse society they'll encounter the rest of their lives.

Arguments against this approach

- ✗ There are lots of middle-class students who need financial and academic help in college. Why focus on just one segment of the student population?
- ✗ If students aren't prepared for college coursework, they shouldn't be admitted, regardless of their background. College admissions should be based on merit alone.

Approach Three

Keep Tuition Down by Making Colleges More Efficient

What should be done

- ▶ Push colleges to use nontraditional teaching methods, like extension courses and courses conducted over the Internet.
- ▶ Establish objective measures, such as testing, class size and faculty qualifications to find out how much college students are learning.
- ▶ Require public colleges to become more efficient, dropping unpopular or irrelevant programs.

Arguments for this approach

- ✓ U.S. taxpayers spend millions of dollars a year on higher education, either directly to colleges or indirectly via financial aid. Yet they don't even know if they're getting their money's worth.
- ✓ The traditional campus setting is great, but it isn't the only way to learn. Courses offered over the Internet, or in other nontraditional ways can reach more students at less cost.

Arguments against this approach

- ✗ College is about academic exploration. Standardized testing would obliterate this academic freedom and turn colleges into factories that just churn out workers, not thinkers.
- ✗ Colleges aren't businesses. They can't be concerned solely with what sells.

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Chicework: Approach One

Invest in Making Sure All Students Can Attend College

An education, particularly a college education, is the key to getting ahead in this country. In today's economy, a college degree has overtaken the high-school diploma as the minimum requirement to get ahead. But college is becoming ever more expensive — in much of the country you can buy a house for what it costs to attend an Ivy League university — and it's harder and harder for middle-class parents to afford. The government needs to make sure that college is available to all students who want an education, by providing tax credits for tuition expenses and expanding all forms of financial aid.

What Should Be Done?

- ▶ Provide tax credits for college tuition
- ▶ Increase the number of federal grants to students
- ▶ Offer free or reduced tuition at state universities for high school students who maintain a certain GPA
- ▶ Expand tax-deferred savings programs to help families save for college
- ▶ Expand programs that pay for college if students promise to serve in public service jobs like teaching, law enforcement or public health.
- ▶ Increase overall state spending on higher education

Arguments For This Approach

- ✓ As a society, we have to invest in higher education: It's the best way of expanding economic and social opportunities. We know that an investment in a college education pays off handsomely in extra earning power. The more students who attend college, the better off our society will be.
- ✓ Middle-class students don't have much of a choice if they want a professional job in today's workforce: They have to find the money for higher education or they simply won't have any job prospects. One of government's primary roles is to ensure the country's economic stability, if not success. If today's employers require college degrees, it is imperative that government do its share to ensure there will be enough future workers.
- ✓ A democracy depends on educated citizens; literate people who can think critically. College is the best place to produce such citizens.

Arguments Against This Approach

- ✗ This choice overstates the problem. True, private colleges can be quite expensive, but on average, a state college costs less than one-quarter as much. The government should help students pay for college, but it doesn't have to subsidize an Ivy League-level education for everyone, any more than it should ensure that everyone can own a Mercedes.
- ✗ Although college is expensive, middle-class families have lots of options to save or borrow for their children's education. Education dollars should be directed toward those students — the poor — who haven't been able to scrape together the funds for college. In these days of budget cuts and belt-tightening, precious resources should go to those who need the help the most.
- ✗ It sounds like heresy, but maybe everybody doesn't need to go to college. The country needs electricians, cooks and florists as much as it needs doctors and lawyers. Some technical jobs can be learned at community colleges, but they can also be learned in vocational schools, technical schools or in apprenticeships. By focusing on college, we're promoting a one-size-fits-all educational system.

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Choicework: Approach Two

Provide Opportunity to the Needy

There's no doubt that higher education represents a ladder out of poverty; the problem is that the poor and minorities have trouble reaching the first rung. Poor and minority families often have trouble raising the money to send their children to college, and even when they do, these students often aren't prepared for the rigors of college because they attended failing high schools. If, as a society, we're serious about giving people a chance to get out of poverty, we need to focus our higher education resources on the people who need it most. That means financial aid should be based on need only and colleges should factor socioeconomic status and race into their admissions decisions. Colleges should also provide remedial help to students who need it: You can't shut people out of the American dream because they were unlucky enough to attend a bad high school.

What should be done?

- ▶ Channel federal and state financial grants to students based on their economic need
- ▶ Increase state funding to community colleges, which often serve low-income students
- ▶ Work with inner-city high schools to ensure their curriculum prepares students for college and expand collaborations between high schools and college to support promising students
- ▶ Strengthen remedial programs for college students who are struggling with their work
- ▶ Use affirmative action plans in making admissions decisions

Arguments for this choice

- ✓ Low-income students, even if they are academically prepared, still struggle to pay for college and pursue college degrees at much lower rates than students from higher income levels. They simply need more financial help than they're currently receiving.
- ✓ A high percentage of the students needing remedial help are minorities, and the track record is promising in terms of their ability to go on to academic success. Is it fair to foreclose opportunity for them just because they may need a little extra help?
- ✓ Affirmative action not only helps minority students, it helps expose all college students to the diverse society they'll encounter the rest of their lives.
- ✓ Education is the best anti-poverty program. If we can raise the education levels for lower-income Americans, we'll not only bring more money into the community but also develop good role models for young people and strengthen communities overall.

Arguments against this choice

- ✗ If students aren't prepared for college coursework, they shouldn't be admitted, regardless of their background. College admissions should be based on merit alone.
- ✗ There are lots of middle-class students who need financial and academic help in college. Why focus on just one segment of the student population when resources could be spread more evenly?
- ✗ If these students aren't prepared for college because they went to troubled high schools, shouldn't we spend public money on fixing the high schools rather than pass the problem on to colleges?
- ✗ Low-income families have lots of more pressing needs than this, like inadequate child care and health care options to drug abuse and violence. Shouldn't we focus public money on solving those problems before worrying about paying for college?

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Choicework: Approach Three

Keep Tuition Down by Making Colleges More Efficient

The reason so many families struggle to send their kids to college is simple: tuition keeps going up, outpacing both inflation and family income. Colleges have to take responsibility for prices that go up so far, so fast, and the best way to solve the problem is for colleges to become more efficient and competitive. Colleges need to make better use of new techniques like distance learning to reach more students at lower cost. For-profit educational institutions are experimenting with new ways of teaching and should be encouraged. We also need stronger accountability for public universities and community colleges. Unlike the K-12 education system, there aren't many yardsticks for measuring the quality of a college education and few ways of knowing whether taxpayers and students are getting what they pay for.

What should be done?

- ▶ Push colleges to use nontraditional teaching methods, like extension courses and courses conducted over the Internet.
- ▶ Establish objective measures, such as testing, class size and faculty qualifications to find out how much college students are learning, and monitor dropout rates. State governments should consider these results when making funding decisions.
- ▶ Encourage the expansion of for-profit institutions in higher education.
- ▶ Require public colleges to become more efficient, dropping unpopular or irrelevant programs, adapting new business methods and focus on teaching.

Arguments for this choice

- ✓ U.S. taxpayers spend billions of dollars a year on higher education, either directly to colleges or indirectly via financial aid. Yet they don't even know if they're getting their money's worth. No one would accept this situation in their local police, fire department or school system. Why should public colleges be any different?
- ✓ This is simple consumer protection. A college education is one of the most important — and expensive — purchases a family makes and yet they rarely have any better information than the "best colleges" lists published in magazines.
- ✓ The traditional campus setting is great, but it isn't the only way to learn. Courses offered over the Internet, on television, or in other nontraditional ways can reach more students at less cost.
- ✓ Colleges should be willing to innovate and respond to the demands of the free market, just as businesses do. It's the only way to make sure higher education keeps pace with a fast-changing world.

Arguments against this choice

- ✗ A college education isn't like a K-12 curriculum. There isn't any consistency among college curricula, and it's very difficult to measure the higher-order thinking skills that colleges aim to teach.
- ✗ Education isn't like making widgets. College is about academic exploration. Standardized testing would obliterate this academic freedom and turn colleges into factories that just churn out workers, not thinkers.
- ✗ Colleges aren't businesses. They can't be concerned solely with what sells. Colleges have the important role of passing culture to new generations. Understanding literature, art and the humanities are part of what makes an educated person.
- ✗ Tuition at public colleges usually goes up when state governments cut back on higher education funding, which they often do in lean budget years. If the public really wants to keep tuition affordable, they should invest more of their tax dollars into the university system.

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Status Report: Where Are We Now?

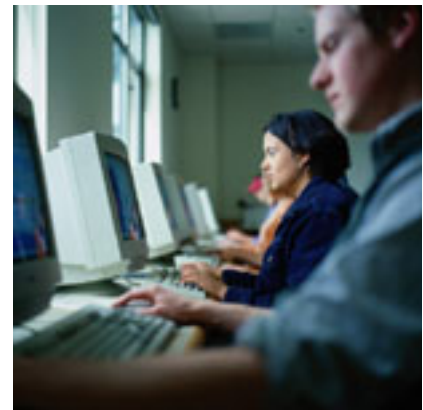
It's hard to imagine, but it used to be that only rich people went to college. Now you don't have to be rich to get a college education – but it doesn't hurt.

Higher education has become a routine part of American life, with two-thirds of Americans getting some form of education after high school. Statistics show that getting a college degree is the surest way of entering (and remaining in) the middle class and pays off in higher earning power.

But while the traditional picture of higher education is of the ivy-covered campus, the reality is much more diverse. The field of "higher education" includes both the intense competition for

students to get into private universities and the low-cost community colleges who take all comers with "open enrollment." Specialized trade schools, state universities, corporate training centers — all are in some way offering knowledge to the public.

Gaining that knowledge can be expensive. It's important to remember, however, that college tuition varies dramatically depending on where you go. On average, private four-year colleges cost more than \$18,000 per year, but average tuition at public colleges is only one-fourth as much and community colleges charge even less. Even so, public universities find themselves facing demands for greater accountabil-



Most college professors say freshmen and sophomores lack basic writing and math skills, but they commend students' computer skills. To read more on whether student's are meeting expectations, see our Reality Check survey.

ity as tuition continues to rise. The public school system has elaborate mechanisms for measuring student achievement and school management. Critics argue that by contrast, there are few standards for measuring whether parents, students and taxpayers are actually getting what they pay for from a college education.

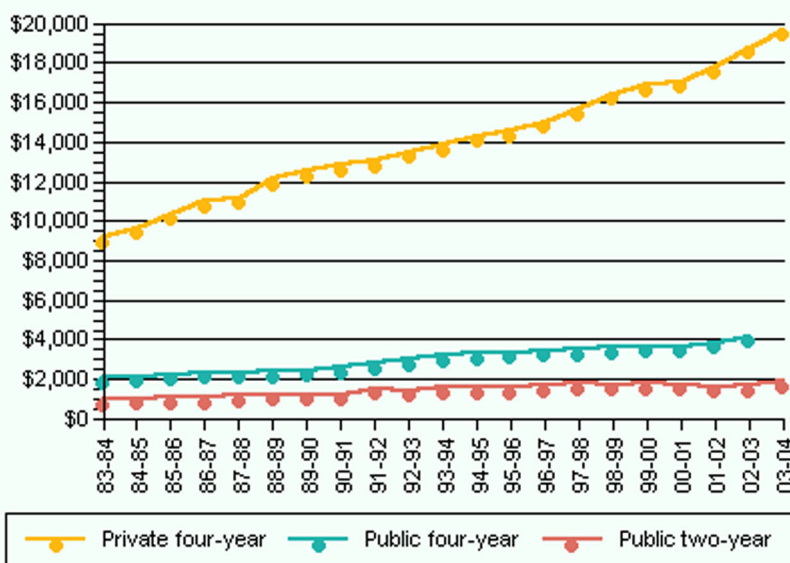
For many public colleges, this debate is taking place in an atmosphere of financial crisis. Because of the sluggish economy of the past several years, state governments are facing serious fiscal problems and many are cutting back on higher education spending. That is likely to translate into tuition increases and service cuts at public colleges.

At What Price?

College prices continue to rise faster than financial aid and family incomes. Indeed, financial considerations often weigh more heavily than academics when a student applies for college. Most students get some form of federal financial aid, but in most cases that help

Average tuition

Average annual college tuition and fees, in constant 2003 dollars, by type of institution, 1983-2003 academic years



Source: "Trends in College Pricing 2003," October 2003, The College Board

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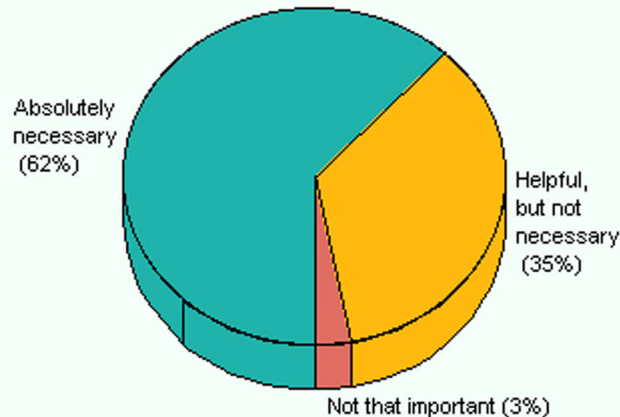
comes with strings attached. Although the government provides two-thirds of all financial aid, more than half comes in the form of loans the student has to pay back, not outright grants. As a result, students commonly graduate thousands of dollars in debt. The average cumulative federal student loan debt for those attending four-year colleges nearly doubled during the 1990s to about \$17,000 per student.

Though income is still a deciding factor in most aid awards, federal grants, states and universities are increasingly helping students who were once too well off to qualify for financial aid. While the situation varies from state to state and university to university, many are devoting an increasing percentage of aid to students based on academic merit, sports ability or musical talent rather than financial need. Universities gave almost half of their \$14.5 billion in scholarship money in 2000 to students based on merit or ability.

Whether race should play a role in admitting students or awarding aid has been one of the fiercest debates in higher education. A generation ago, many colleges still turned away students based

Six in 10 parents of high school students say a college education is absolutely necessary for their child

When it comes to your own child, do you think a college education is something absolutely necessary, something helpful but not necessary, or not that important?



Source: Public Agenda 12/99

on race, gender or religion. That has changed. Women now constitute more than half of all college students, and in 1999, minorities accounted for 28 percent of the nation's college enrollment. Much of that change has been because of affirmative action programs that give minorities extra consideration for admissions and aid. Many college officials say using affirmative

action to ensure a diverse student body is part of what college is all about: Preparing students for the increasingly diverse world that awaits them. Advocates also argue that affirmative action is the best way to make sure minorities get the opportunities they were once denied.

But in recent years, some white students have complained they

The Public's Viewpoint

When it comes to higher education, the American public invariably zeroes in on two areas: who goes and how much it costs. Majorities say it's important to have a college degree to get ahead in today's society, and **60 percent of parents of high school students say college is absolutely essential for their child.** But the public also sees a college education as more than merely an economic advantage. Surveys find the public thinks it's essential for college students to

gain maturity and learn to get along with different people, and it's important for colleges to have racially diverse student body. Yet **large majorities also say schools should not consider a student's race or ethnicity** in admissions.

Half of parents surveyed say they're very concerned about saving enough to put their children through college. But surveys find a majority also believes that anyone who really wants a college education can get one and **nearly**

half say there are "too many students in college who don't belong there." This may relate to another public attitude found in surveys — that it's up to the student to make the most out of college. The public's belief in the student's personal responsibility covers both academics and finances. Nearly half blame the student, not the college, if a student drops out and **three-quarters say students only appreciate college if they have some responsibility for paying for it.**

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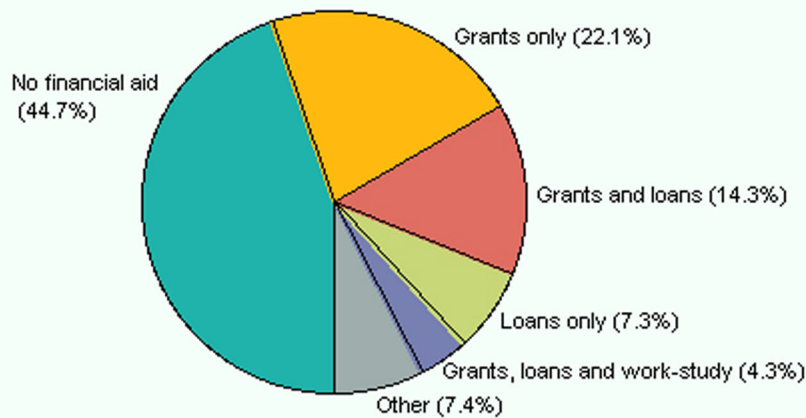
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Financial aid recipients

Percentage of undergraduates receiving financial aid, by type of aid, 1999-2000 academic year



Note: Based on a survey of approximately 50,000 undergraduates enrolled at any time during the 1999-2000 academic year. The income of undergraduates claimed as dependents is based on parents' income and the income of undergraduates not claimed is based on their own income. Source: "Student Financing of Undergraduate Education: 1999-2000," National Center for Education Statistics

are being denied admission in favor of minority students with poorer grades. Critics also say that using race as a factor, even with

Face the Facts

Loans accounted for 53 percent of all financial aid in the 2001 academic year. The percentage of loans paying for higher education, compared to grant money (40 percent in 2001) has held steady at about 55 percent in recent years. But in 1995, 1996 and 1997 loans accounted for the majority (60 percent) of total aid.

the best intentions, is wrong because it moves us further away from a society based on merit. As a practical matter, students who are turned away from one institution probably attend another college. But many are convinced that attending one of the nation's selective universities is the first step to joining the rest of society's elite institutions.

Some states, such as Texas, Florida and Georgia, have tried to solve the problem by guaranteeing state-university admission to any high school student who graduates with a certain grade-point average. The U.S. Supreme Court, in a closely watched case involving the University of Michigan, made a partial endorsement of affirmative action in 2003. The court ruled that race can be a factor, but not an overriding factor, in admissions policy. While the court's ruling will permit affirmative action in some form, it still leaves debate over exactly

how to implement it.

Access vs. Success

Providing access to college, financial or otherwise, is one thing. But ensuring that students actually succeed in college is quite another. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 30 percent of all incoming college freshmen require some form of remediation. At the community college level, the need is even greater, with 41 percent of all entering students requiring at least one remedial class. The demand has forced all of the nation's community colleges and 81 percent of four-year higher education institutions to offer remediation to students.

Colleges are trying to be flexible to meet the needs of students by giving them more control over their course selection and offering schedules to accommodate working students. But along with these options has come criticism that the open door has turned into a "revolving door," with students dropping out regularly and taking extra years to complete their degrees. A 1996 UCLA study found that slightly less than 40 percent of students were able to complete a bachelor's degree within four years after entering college, a decline of nearly 7 percent from 20 years before.

Public colleges have traditionally been shielded from the kind of academic scrutiny placed on K-12 schools. But if students come to college unprepared, what should be done to promote academic success? Some would argue that students shouldn't be in college if they cannot handle the academics. Others, however, argue that colleges cannot deny students an opportunity just because their high schools may not have adequately prepared them for college.

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Additional Resources

- ▶ Visit our partner, **The New York Times Learning Network** for the latest campaign news, stories, and information on what the candidates are saying about these issues. Read the day's top stories and check out the "Issues in Depth" section for additional information.
- ▶ Even more information about the candidates and the campaign is available from our partner, **MTV's Choose or Lose**.
- ▶ For more information on higher education, visit **Public Agenda Online's issue guide**.
- ▶ Think you know this topic? Try our **Test Your Knowledge** feature.
- ▶ Think these choices don't go far enough? Do you want to mix and match options? Visit Public Agenda Online and try our **Create Your Own Choicework** feature.
- ▶ Want to find organizations on all sides of this issue? Visit **Sources and Resources**.

Set Your Own Priorities

Making public policy decisions isn't just about choosing the best way of attacking a problem – you also have to consider which problem should be tackled first. There are lots of things the government *could* do, and many it *should* do, but not even the federal government can do everything at once. So priorities have to be set. With our **First Things First** feature on Public Agenda Online, you can work through what you think the next administration should do – and what it should do first. Find out more at:

www.publicagenda.org/firstchoice2004/first-things-first.cfm

Find Out More About the Issues

If you like this edition of *First Choice 2004*, read some of our companion guides on:

- ▶ Terrorism and Foreign Policy
- ▶ Health Care
- ▶ Race and Affirmative Action
- ▶ Gay Rights
- ▶ Paying for College
- ▶ The Environment
- ▶ Jobs and the Economy
- ▶ Taxes and the Deficit
- ▶ Immigration

For even more detail, visit **Public Agenda Online**, which offers nonpartisan issue guides on 21 issues ranging from abortion to welfare reform.