

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

1 Enforce equality before the law

2 Give minorities extra assistance with affirmative action

3 Help minorities by attacking poverty



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▶ *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. 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 sugar-coating any options or trashing other points of view. We call this section Chocicework.

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

Enforce Equality Before the Law

What should be done

- ▶ Spend more money on enforcement of current civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination.
- ▶ End affirmative action programs. Base college admissions, government contracting and private employment decisions solely on merit.
- ▶ Ban and prosecute private industry practices that discriminate, such as when banks refuse to make loans in minority neighborhoods or charge higher interest rates to minorities.

Arguments for this choice

- ✓ The Constitution promises equal protection under the laws, not equal results. Judging people by their race, even with the best intentions, is wrong.
- ✓ The best way to guarantee racial justice is to apply the full force of the law whenever individuals have been discriminated against.

Arguments against this choice

- ✗ Most discrimination is subtle. Current civil rights laws only help the small percentage of victims who can prove they were intentionally discriminated against.
- ✗ Laws guaranteeing equal rights are vital, but can't make up for 300 years of racism. Without affirmative action, minorities will fall behind.

Approach Two

Give Minorities Extra Assistance with Affirmative Action

What should be done

- ▶ Maintain affirmative action in government hiring and encourage business to do the same.
- ▶ Continue to use race as a consideration in university admissions and financial aid. Provide extra tutoring and help to minority students.
- ▶ Insist on proof that the proportions of minorities among police, firefighters and school teachers reflect the community they serve.

Arguments for this approach

- ✓ The ideal of a color-blind society is fine, but we're not nearly there yet. If we stop affirmative action now, minorities will lose ground.
- ✓ Many social institutions won't change their attitudes toward minorities until their personnel start to reflect the whole society.

Arguments against this approach

- ✗ It's wrong to make decisions based on race. Getting a job and getting into college should be based on merit.
- ✗ The fundamental problem is educational and economic disadvantage, not racial discrimination. If we attack poverty, we'll solve most of the problems plaguing minorities.

Approach Three

Help Minorities by Attacking Poverty

What should be done

- ▶ Abandon race-based preferences and provide expanded public support for the poor regardless of race.
- ▶ Improve public schools in low-income neighborhoods so kids who grow up there in have the same opportunity to succeed that other kids have.
- ▶ Focus on income level, rather than race, in making decisions on college admissions and student aid.

Arguments for this approach

- ✓ Racial discrimination doesn't account for most of the inequities in American life today. The largest factor is that poor people of all races lack the resources they need to move ahead.
- ✓ Affirmative action programs end up helping a lot of middle-class minorities who don't really need preferential treatment or special forms of public assistance.

Arguments against this approach

- ✗ Racial minorities still need and deserve special consideration because of the obstacles they have experienced.
- ✗ This approach pretends that racial discrimination doesn't exist. Even if you give minorities more support and economic opportunities, they'll still face discrimination.

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Chicework: Approach One

Enforce Equality Before the Law

The only fair way to achieve racial equality is by strictly adhering to the principle of equality under the law. The law should be “color blind” — there’s simply no room in our society for any discrimination based on race. The government’s obligation is to ensure that the rules of the game are the same for everyone. But the Constitution promises equal opportunity, not equal results. Racial justice means breaking down any discriminatory barriers, redressing individual grievances, and ensuring equal treatment in education, in the workplace, housing and elsewhere. Beyond that, whether you win or lose is up to you.

What Should Be Done?

- ▶ Spend more money on enforcement of current civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in employment, education, voting and housing.
- ▶ End affirmative action programs. Base college admissions, government contracting and private employment decisions solely on merit.
- ▶ Ban and prosecute private industry practices that discriminate, such as when banks refuse to make loans in minority neighborhoods or charge higher interest rates to minorities.

Arguments For This Approach

- ✓ The Constitution promises equal protection under the laws, not equal results. We have an obligation to ensure fair competition to get ahead. But judging people by their race, even with the best intentions, is wrong.
- ✓ The American legal system is designed for the protection of personal rights, not the grievances of entire groups. The best way to guarantee racial justice is to apply the full force of the law whenever individuals have been discriminated against.
- ✓ The civil rights laws protect the rights of racial minorities regarding education, employment, voting, access to public accommodations, and other matters. As long as those laws are enforced, the government has done its job.
- ✓ Two wrongs don’t make a right. If we favor minorities now because we favored whites in the past, society is just replacing one kind of discrimination with another.

Arguments Against This Approach

- ✗ Most discrimination is subtle. Current civil rights laws only help the small percentage of victims who can prove they were intentionally discriminated against.
- ✗ Laws guaranteeing equal rights are vital, but can’t make up for 300 years of racism. Without affirmative action, minorities will fall behind.
- ✗ To achieve the goal of racial equality, we need something more than a legal watchdog. Government has to give extra help to people who are being left behind because of a long history of racism.
- ✗ Breaking down legal discrimination is vital, but that does nothing to address the poverty, bad schools and dead-end jobs that hold minorities back in society.

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Chicework: Approach Two

Give Minorities Extra Assistance with Affirmative Action

Our country has to admit the enduring legacy of racial discrimination and make up for it. Groups that have historically been discriminated against – and frankly still do experience discrimination — have to be given extra help to make progress toward racial equality. The government and private industry should give preference to those who have to overcome discrimination. We'll know racial justice has been achieved when there is evidence of roughly equal results, for example, when people hold college degrees and good-paying jobs in proportion to the various races in society.

What should be done?

- ▶ Maintain affirmative action policies in government hiring and encourage business to do the same.
- ▶ Continue to use race as a consideration in university admissions and financial aid. Provide extra tutoring and help to minority students to keep them from dropping out.
- ▶ Insist on proof that the proportions of minorities among police, firefighters and school teachers reflect the community they serve.
- ▶ Continue "set-aside" programs that direct a percentage of government contracts to minority-owned businesses.
- ▶ Keep preferences in effect until parity is achieved.

Arguments for this choice

- ✓ The ideal of a color-blind society is fine, but we're not nearly there yet. If we stop affirmative action now, minorities will lose ground.
- ✓ The whole problem with prejudice is that entire groups are denied a fair deal, not just individuals. So we need remedies for entire groups as well.
- ✓ Many social institutions won't change their attitudes toward minorities until their personnel start to reflect the whole society. For example, when a police department has minority officers in proportion to the city it protects, the way it treats minority citizens will reflect that.
- ✓ Lots of groups get preferential treatment in hiring and admissions, such as veterans or children of a college's alumni. Why shouldn't we grant similar benefits to racial minorities?

Arguments against this choice

- ✗ It's wrong to make decisions based on race, even with good intentions. Getting a job and getting into college should be based strictly on merit – the best qualified person should get the position, regardless of race.
- ✗ Affirmative action stigmatizes the people who benefit from it – no matter how talented they are, others will always suspect they're getting ahead because of their race.
- ✗ We've taken down most of the legal barriers to getting ahead in our society. We don't need to give anyone special treatment.
- ✗ The fundamental problem is educational and economic disadvantage, not racial discrimination. If we attack poverty in general, we'll also solve many of the problems plaguing minorities.

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Chicework: Approach Three

Help Minorities by Attacking Poverty

The major barrier to racial equality today is not discrimination but poverty, which is keeping too many members of minority groups from succeeding. Minorities lag in most economic indicators – education, income, unemployment, even home ownership. Only when the government provides the raw material for a decent life — including quality education, health care and child care for everyone – will there really be equal opportunity. If we attack poverty, we'll not only tackle the biggest obstacle to racial equality, we'll also provide an equal opportunity to everyone, regardless of race.

What should be done?

- ▶ Abandon race-based preferences and provide expanded public support for the poor regardless of race, such as additional assistance for low-income single mothers.
- ▶ Improve public schools in low-income neighborhoods so kids who grow up there have the same opportunity to succeed that other kids have.
- ▶ Focus on income level, rather than race, in making decisions on college admissions and student aid.
- ▶ Expand race-neutral programs that make a difference for poor people, including job skills training, comprehensive health care legislation, anti-crime efforts, and drug abuse prevention.

Arguments for this choice

- ✓ Racial discrimination doesn't account for most of the inequities in American life today. The largest factor is that poor people of all races lack the resources they need to move ahead.
- ✓ Affirmative action programs end up helping a lot of middle-class minorities who don't really need preferential treatment or special forms of public assistance.
- ✓ In a nation committed to equal treatment under the law, government has an obligation to help all individuals become self-reliant, regardless of their race.
- ✓ Equality of opportunity requires that the government take measures to help people deal with the problems associated with poverty. Assistance should be provided according to need, not on the basis of race.

Arguments against this choice

- ✗ Racial minorities still need and deserve special consideration because of the obstacles they have experienced.
- ✗ This approach pretends that racial discrimination doesn't exist. Even if you give minorities more support and economic opportunities, they'll still face discrimination.
- ✗ This is the "big government" approach. It'll be expensive, and unfortunately many government social programs have just made the poor more dependent on the government.
- ✗ It is unrealistic to think that the best way to solve racial issues is to mount a broad attack on poverty. The problem of poverty may never be solved, but much can be done to achieve racial equity.

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Status Report: Where Are We Now?

Race is the enduring, heartbreaking problem of American society, and always has been — after all, the first slaves arrived in North America a year before the Pilgrims did. At any given moment, the American struggle with race gives us reason to hope and reason to fear the future.

By many standards, minorities are much better off than they were four decades ago, when the civil rights movement won its most enduring victories. High school and college graduation rates, life expectancy, home ownership and political participation all have risen substantially for African-Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans. The black poverty rate has hit its lowest level ever.

And yet blacks are still three times more likely to be poor than whites,

and twice as likely to be unemployed. African-American and Hispanic men with college degrees earn less than their white counterparts. Roughly 13 percent of black men are ineligible to vote because of a felony conviction. Other recent studies have found that whites receive better medical treatment than blacks even when they have the same insurance coverage, and that African-Americans face higher mortgage rates regardless of their credit histories.

In some respects, Hispanics lag even further behind than blacks — substantially fewer Hispanics graduate from high school, and substantially more go without health insurance. But Hispanics also have a lower unemployment rate than blacks, and as a group get somewhat higher SAT scores.



Statistics on school achievement are examined in our issue guides on [education](#) and [race](#).

Asian-Americans are ahead of blacks and Hispanics and comparable to whites in many areas, particularly in education.

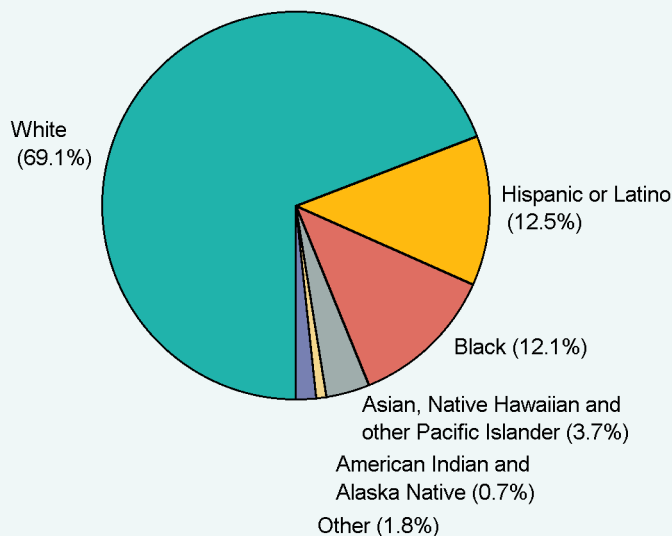
What will we do?

But these are broad, sweeping statistics. Race is an intensely personal topic and at some point people have to decide what they are willing to do for equality. Does it matter to them if their chances of getting into a certain college or a job they want are affected by affirmative action (either pro or con)? Does it matter if they live in an area that's mostly the same race? Does it matter to them if the police in their town take a closer look at black motorists?

Historically, the dominant discussion on race relations in America has been between blacks and whites, but demographic trends are changing that. Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau. And as attitudes have changed, interracial dating and marriage have become more common, which means a small but growing number of mixed-race Americans. By 2050 census esti-

Racial and ethnic composition of the U.S.

Estimated population of the United States by race and ethnic origin, 2000



Source: "Summary File 1," Gateway Census 2000, U.S. Census Bureau

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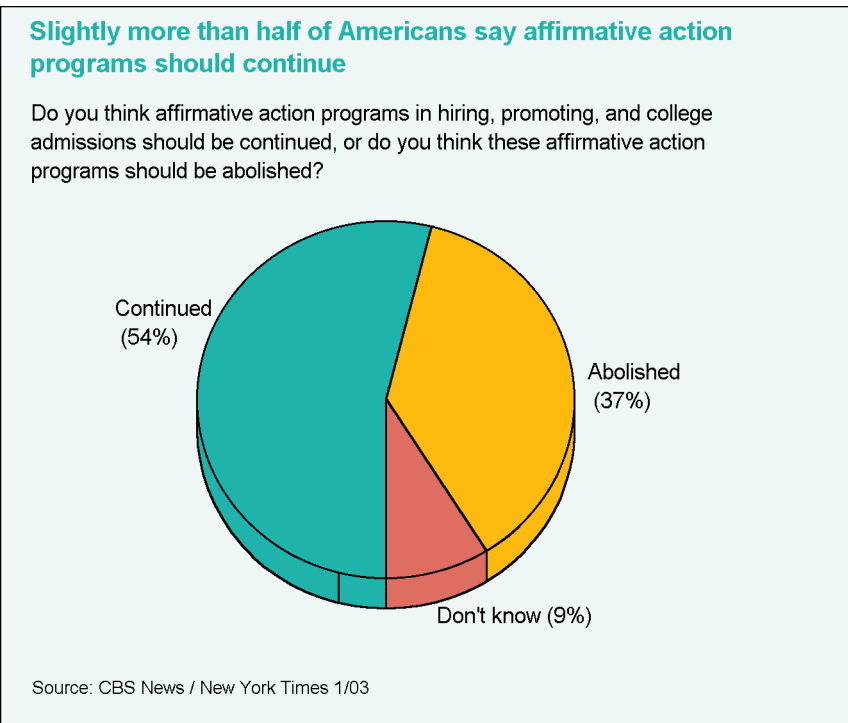
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mates predict that non-Hispanic whites, who are now 74 percent of Americans, will only account for 54 percent of the population.

Seeking reasons

The problem of race involves the government, but it obviously involves more than government. It's reflected in how we treat each other and in the daily decisions we make. And that means there isn't always just one cause driving racial issues.

Statistics show that most black children and many Hispanic ones, for example, still attend schools that are mostly minority. The legal basis for school segregation ended long ago, so why is this happening? Is it because of the ways school districts manage enrollment? Is it because many minorities can't afford to move to the suburbs, or because so many whites moved away from the cities? Is it because banks, real-estate sellers and landlords still throw up barriers to minority homeownership? Or is it because people put up an unspoken "you're not welcome" vibe when people of other races move in?



And if diversity is a good thing, if rubbing elbows with each other makes for a more tolerant, stronger nation, what should we be willing to do to change this?

Affirmative actions

There's no doubt that racism

played an enormous role in American history – and still plays a role today. But what do we need to do now, today, to make it right?

Many people argue that the legacy of slavery, bias and the apartheid-like "Jim Crow" laws is so deeply ingrained that we still

The Public's Viewpoint

In a variety of polls, majorities of both minorities and whites say there is still racial discrimination in society, but also say that things have improved. But when it comes to perceptions of racial equality — and the intensity of those perceptions — the views are a world apart. **Six in 10 blacks and four in 10 Hispanics say racism in the workplace is a major problem, for example, but only two in 10 whites believe that.**

That pattern is also significant on affirmative action. Strong majorities of all races say that

hiring, promotions, and college admissions should be "strictly on merit." Yet surveys also show that **minorities, especially blacks, are much more likely than whites to favor "extra efforts" to recruit minorities.** More than half of Americans say employers should be required by law to maintain diversity in the workplace, but strongly disagree with giving jobs to minorities over equally qualified whites. There is overall support for programs that provide "assistance" for minorities getting a job, getting promoted or getting into

college. But support among whites drops dramatically when the question refers to minorities getting "preference."

Personal experience may play a key role in these perceptions. **Far more blacks (44 percent) say they've been treated like potential shoplifters than whites** (30 percent). And 57 percent of blacks say they believe they've been pulled over by police because of their race, compared to 11 percent of the general public.

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need to make extra efforts to balance it out. That's the impulse behind affirmative action, the ongoing attempt by government to redress past grievances through present-day racial and gender preferences in hiring, college admissions and contracting. Some even argue that the government should pay reparations and apologize for slavery.

Others say that Jim Crow crumbled 40 years ago and we can't keep blaming modern problems on the past. Affirmative action, these people argue, moves the country even farther from the goal of a "color-blind" society.

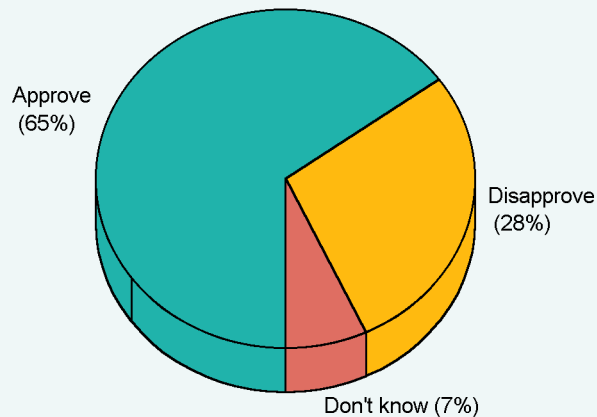
Ballot propositions in several states, including California and Texas, have struck down long-standing affirmative action plans. Some states have tried guaranteeing state-university admission to high school students who have a certain grade-point average. Proponents say this gives minority students an advantage because a "B" average from a poor inner-city high school counts the same

Face the Facts

Blacks and Hispanics earn less than other races, according to the Census Bureau. Asians/Pacific Islanders earn the most, with a mean income of \$36,436 in 2001. The average income for whites was \$34,457 and \$24,092 for blacks. Hispanics earned the least with an average income of \$22,687 in 2001.

Nearly two-thirds approve of affirmative action being based on income rather than race

Would you approve or disapprove of affirmative action based on income instead of race, that is, giving preferences for college admissions to people from low income families, regardless of their race or ethnic background?



Source: Newsweek / PSRA 1/03

as a "B" from a rich suburban school. Opponents say the system ends up guaranteeing admission to suburban students who don't really need help.

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.

"Driving while black"

For generations, one flashpoint in race relations has been police conduct, or misconduct, toward minorities. Surveys find that whites and African-Americans agree on what's right and wrong when it comes to police conduct. But African-Americans are far less confident that the police will act professionally or that the courts

will treat them fairly. In fact, one of the first affirmative action battles was in police hiring, where supporters argued that police departments should reflect their community.

One of the most persistent problems is "racial profiling" — the officially improper but widely practiced technique of identifying potential suspects by their race. African-Americans said the practice had become so prevalent among traffic officers that they coined a new, ironic term: "DWB," or "driving while black."

Sept. 11, and the threat it raised of Islamic terrorism, put a different spin on events. Polls show most Americans reject the profiling of blacks but not necessarily profiling in general. A Public Agenda survey in January found most Americans - including a majority of African-Americans - view the racial profiling by police of Middle Eastern men as regrettable but not intolerable.

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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. For more information specifically on race, visit their **Issues in Depth** section.
- ▶ Even more information about the candidates and the campaign is available from our partner, **MTV's Choose or Lose**.
- ▶ **Youth Vote** is the nation's largest nonpartisan coalition working to increase the political involvement of 50 million Americans between 18-30 years old. The Youth Vote coalition consists of over one hundred diverse national organizations representing hundreds of organizations and millions of young people.
- ▶ **Kids Voting USA** fosters an informed electorate by educating and engaging students and their families in voting and other elements of effective civic engagement.
- ▶ To find out more about specific candidates running for office in your area, we suggest the nonpartisan Web sites **Project Vote Smart** or **DemocracyNet**.
- ▶ For more information on race, 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**.
- ▶ Funding for First Choice 2004 was provided by the **Carnegie Corporation of New York**.

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.