

What does a Club endorsement mean?

By Tim Killeen, SEMG Political Committee Chair

In early January the Political Committee will begin the process of endorsing candidates for next year's elections. What should an endorsement by the Sierra Club tell you? It is not as straightforward as it may seem. What if a candidate professes to be a strong supporter of the environment but has no public record to back that up? What if a candidate has a lukewarm record but there are no better prospects in that district? How do you determine a good record in the first place? The process turns out to be a series of judgment calls.

Starting with the record, for every election cycle the Club puts together a vote chart intended to evaluate the evidence regarding sitting legislators' environmental stance. Over a two-year period there may be as many as two hundred bills either passed or defeated by a vote in the Legislature. These bills are then condensed down to a chart that has a dozen or so votes that the Legislative Committee determines are crucial in helping the Chapter and Groups separate the wheat from the chaff. A bill might be left off the vote chart if it was either passed or defeated by a unanimous vote or strong political pressure, because it might not really help us in setting our best friends on the environment apart. You also need to be aware that plenty of personal judgments are involved in putting the chart together.

So, what besides the vote chart is involved in an endorsement decision? In some districts you may have a legislator who has a fair to poor voting record but the judgment might be made that he or she would still be better than any other candidate. Maybe that person is a sure winner because no challenger has any hope against him or her, or because of the overwhelming advantage that one party has over the other in that district, or because the challenger has no resources to mount an effective campaign. Maybe a legislator has a decent voting record but has voted against the Club's position on a few key issues. Is it better to have someone raise the environment in an election even though he or she will lose than to have someone who we can work with and get a few more votes out of in the Legislature if he or she has our support? When it comes to casting a vote, legislators are pulled in many different directions by interest groups other than environmental groups, as well as by their party.

The member volunteers who sit on the Executive or Political Committee must take all of this into consideration when making an endorsement decision. Endorsements are part idealistic and part pragmatic. We hope we have a balance of perspectives on our Committees that will take all the factors into account.

An endorsement is a best judgment, nothing more, nothing less. The meetings in which these decisions are made are open to all members. Making endorsements is not a perfect process. Remember, when a Club endorsement for your district shows up in your mailbox, it means that in the most informed judgment of Club volunteers, the candidate involved is the best choice for the environment and deserves your vote.