

Talking Points | 2016 NEA Recommendation Strategy

What's at stake for NEA in the 2016 presidential race?

There is an incredible amount at stake in the 2016 election, and that goes far beyond who sits in the oval office when things are said and done. The results of the 2016 presidential election will have direct consequences for us as educators, for our students, and for working families across the nation. We will see far reaching effects at the federal, state, local and judicial levels, and it is vital that we have an ally to work with.

The next President of the United States will determine the direction of the Department of Education, and the Department of Labor. They will fill Supreme Court vacancies, influence immigration reform, and shape the reliability of our retirement security – Social Security, Medicare, and healthcare. Our ability to engage our members and community around the 2016 race will affect the U.S. Senate and House, which will affect redistricting, which will affect your state and local elections.

There is an ongoing war against unions, against working families, and against public education. If your home state has yet to feel the effects of these attacks, your brothers and sisters in neighboring states most certainly have. Right now, the U.S. Senate & House are in conservative anti-union hands. There are few scenarios that suggest we can flip one, let alone both, of these chambers in the next election and hold it. Without a presidential ally to play goalie and veto bad policy, our ability to protect students and educators is in real jeopardy. We need a candidate who can win not only the democratic primary campaign, but who can also be victorious when faced with an opposing candidate who wants to destroy public education and Labor as we know it.

The Republican presidential candidates have made it no secret that they will, starting on day one in the White House, work tirelessly to shut down unions and privatize our schools through block grant federal school programs. We see from our state fights that those leading the anti-public education fight have more of an appetite against us than ever before. We need to be strategic about the 2016 election not just for the presidency, but the impact it can have in helping us rebuild the Senate and House, and putting us where we need to be for redistricting so we can win locally. Our success to rebuild is directly impacted by the inspiration our presidential candidate has to drive voters to the polls.

Why recommend a candidate now?

First and foremost, this is not early. In fact, the timing puts NEA in a great position. Recommending before the primary makes a powerful, well timed stance that shows our strength as the nation's largest union, and provides a platform to showcase our dedication to advocating for our students and their futures. This is not early, because now is the time that we can have a major impact on securing the nomination for the candidate who will work with us, and who will be a champion for strong public schools. This is not early, because if we do not recommend now – we are leaving it up to other organizations to ultimately decide who our candidate will be in the general election.

Acting now allows us to pick our champion, and build credibility with the campaign, and that candidate, while demonstrating our value as a real player with substantial political power to bring to the table. We need to ensure that our views are part of the conversation on policies and priorities – not to concede that space by sitting on the sidelines. Acting now gives us a valuable voice in the room early, and often when it comes to working with the next administration.

When we waited until the RA vote in 2008, we were one of the last organizations to endorse Obama. This left us, and our key issues in a position of little relevancy to the candidate and excluded us from being part of the team. We've learned that when we don't act soon enough, campaigns go around us and organize our members without us. By the time they receive our official recommendation, their platforms are developed and they are well on their way to winning or losing.

When we wait, we miss out on important opportunities to engage the candidates and their campaigns; to engage with and build advocacy within our communities, and most importantly – we lose the opportunity to engage our own membership, and create opportunities for activism and leadership.

Even unions who endorsed candidates who did not win the party nomination were better positioned than if they had waited out the entire primary because they were able to use that time and that endorsement to engage their membership and their community – and that work made their message heard.

Some have argued that we should wait until the February meeting. However, delaying this action – even just a few months – significantly diminishes our influence. We are one of the largest unions in Iowa and New Hampshire, where their caucus and primary are a major benchmark moment for the race. This takes place in the first two weeks of February, and on March 1st, Super Tuesday, twelve states hold primaries that will elect twenty-three percent of the delegates for the nomination. We are the nation’s largest union – our strength and our voices matter, and are needed. If we wait, we will not have activated and organized our members in a way that impacts the race, and we will have diminished our influence while other unions with far fewer members in Iowa and New Hampshire will be seen as closer, reliable partners.

Waiting until February or later leaves no time to engage our members, or to have an impact on the outcome. We know in our state races that the timing of a recommendation can be just as important as the candidate, and that effective program requires time for successful implementation. You have a history of being strategic with your Governor, legislative, and local elections – now we must be strategic on the federal level. Making a recommendation now undoubtedly puts the NEA in the best possible position to serve our members, advocate for our students, and hold the next President of the United States, along with elected representatives on all levels accountable.