



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... POLITICAL PARTY PLATFORMS

Think of it as an invitation to a party—so to speak. In their platforms, political parties make a broad statement about who they are and what they stand for in the hope that you will decide to join them. You can find the full text of the 2012 Democratic and Republican platforms on the websites of the parties' national committees. (See <http://www.democrats.org/democratic-national-platform> and http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform_home/.)

What to Watch Out For

When you read a party's platform, keep these questions in mind:

- **Whose platform is it, and what do you know about that party's basic political positions?** Understanding the basics will help you to interpret key phrases. For instance, how might the terms *family values* and *religious freedom* be defined differently in the Democratic and Republican platforms?
- **Who is the audience?** Parties direct their platforms to two different groups—the party faithful and potential new supporters. For example, Democrats want to keep their traditional supporters, like union members, but they also want to broaden their appeal to the middle class and to small-business owners. Republicans want to keep their base (including pro-life activists) happy but also want to attract more women in an effort to close the gender gap. How does this dual audience affect how parties portray themselves?
- **Which statements reflect values, and which are statements of fact?** First, get clear about the values you are being asked to support. Parties tend to sprinkle their platforms liberally with terms like *fundamental rights*. Everybody is in favor of fundamental rights. Which ones do they actually mean, and do you consider them fundamental rights? What are the costs and benefits of agreeing to their value claims? Then evaluate the facts. Are they accurate? Check out statistics. Do they seem reasonable? If not, look them up.
- **Do you think the party can deliver on its policy proposals?** What resources (money, power, and so on) would it need? Can it get them? Would enacting the promised policies achieve what the party claims it would? Who would win, and who would lose?
- **What is your reaction to the platform?** Could you support it? How does it fit with your personal values and political beliefs? Is the appeal of this platform emotional? Intellectual? Ideological? Moral? Remember that party platforms are not just statements of party principles and policy proposals; they are also advertisements. Read them with all the caution and suspicion you would bring to bear on any other ad that attempts to convince you to buy, or buy into, something. *Caveat emptor!* (Let the buyer beware!)

