

"What is believed to be a record for staying on the job is held by Rep. Louis Ludlow, Democrat of Indiana. A member of Congress since 1929, Ludlow has never gone back to his state during recesses but has remained on the job at the Capitol. He is a former president of the National Press Club and was the first newspaper correspondent to go directly from the press gallery to a seat in Congress." Photograph by Harris & Ewing, Aug. 31, 1937. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-23291



Information Please

The 4-1-1 on Becoming an Informed Voter

By John Greiner

Practical tips for managing media overload

Wilbur Wright, who with his brother Orville introduced the world to manned flight, and humorist Will Rogers are easily recognized names among Oklahomans, and they unknowingly played roles in state elections of the past. Only trouble was, the famous aviator Wright was dead when voters first elected Wilbur Wright of Muskogee labor commissioner in 1970, and famous humorist Will Rogers was living in California when Oklahomans elected Will Rogers of Moore to Congress in 1932.

What's in a Name?

The two candidates' famous names helped get them into office. Rogers was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives while the famous humorist-turned-journalist Will Rogers was writing columns and appearing in movies. The less famous Rogers had been a school superintendent in several Oklahoma towns when he filed for office. In his lifetime, he'd gone by Will C., W.C., and William C. Rogers, he told *The Daily Oklahoman* on July 15, 1932. There's a pretty good chance that some voters didn't realize in 1932 that the Rogers running for Congress was not "the" well-known Will Rogers.

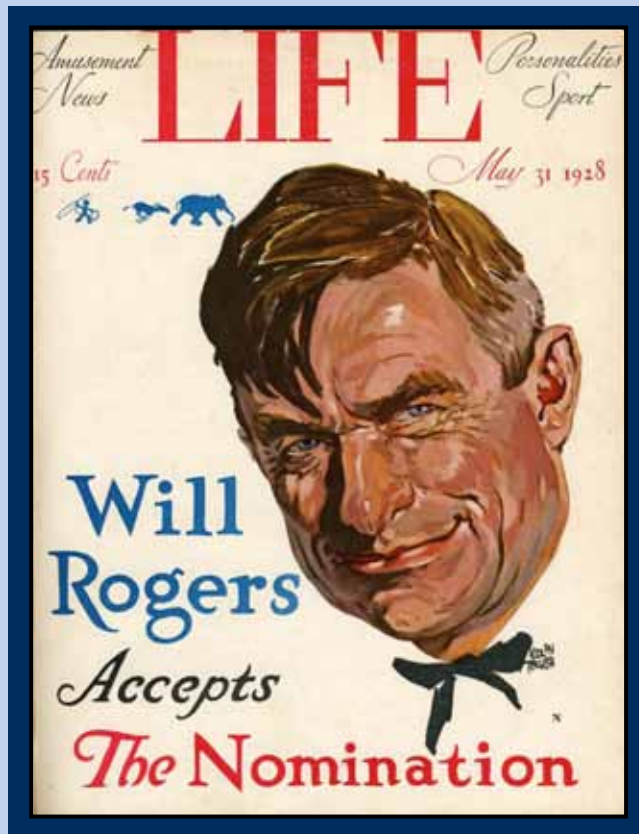
Wright, a Muskogee watchmaker and Democrat, was elected Oklahoma Labor Commissioner in 1970. He showed up on the Democratic primary ballot again in 1974 when seven Democrats ran for their party's nomination for state labor commissioner. That year Wright was pushed into a primary runoff by another Will Rogers, a retired highway patrol trooper. Wright won the runoff and was elected to office. He resigned in 1975 after he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge involving travel claims. But a misdemeanor didn't prohibit him being a candidate again; he ran unsuccessfully for corporation commission in 1976.

Famous-name candidates have cropped up often since Oklahoma became a state. As recently as 2008, a David Boren (city of Moore)—not the David Boren who is current president of the University of Oklahoma and a former state legislator, governor, and U.S. Senator—ran against an incumbent state senator and came close to winning. Famous names can attract a voter's attention and sometimes, in the absence of knowing a candidate's stance on the issues, his/her vote.

Media that Matters

The 1974 Wright-Rogers runoff election pointed out the dilemma that faces Oklahoma voters: How do you get information on a candidate for public office? These days, voters are bombarded by politicians' press releases extolling their virtues and blasting their opponents in one or two well-constructed sentences. Bumper stickers and slogans abound to portray a candidate in a good light—or to cast aspersions on his or her opponent.

John Greiner was a Capitol Bureau reporter for *The Oklahoman* for 37 years. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame in 1993 and awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Society of Professional Journalists in 2010. His retirement in 2009 prompted a state Senate resolution in praise of his work.



LIFE magazine cover, 1928, showing Will Rogers as the presidential candidate for the "Anti-Bunk" Party. As part of the spoof, Rogers wrote a series of articles for LIFE, mocking candidates and politics. Courtesy Will Rogers Memorial Museum

INFORMATION AT A GLANCE

Oklahoma State Election Board: www.ok.gov/elections

- Find telephone numbers for your county election board
- Register to vote [or confirm that you're registered]
- Find out where to cast your ballot

Oklahoma Ethics Commission: www.ok.gov/oec

- Find out who is financing a candidate's campaign
- Read reports on campaign contributions and expenditures
- Read informal opinions in interpreting ethics laws

Oklahoma State Legislature: www.oklegislature.gov

- Find directories and bios of current state legislators
- Find the state and federal legislators for your district
- Browse the Oklahoma Constitution and Statutes
- Track the progress of current legislation

League of Women Voters of Oklahoma: www.lwvok.org

- Read a guide on citizen lobbying
- Read candidates' answers to League-posed questions
- Find links to info on state and federal elections and issues

Editor's note: Websites and election dates are "as of press time."



Voters have a tendency to pay more attention to the big, statewide races such as governor and U.S. Senate. Keeping track of everyone who is running can be a monumental task for voters. Several hundred candidates generally file for state and federal offices in an election year. In Oklahoma's 2012 elections, state and federal political candidates will be running in districts with new boundaries. Voters will have to understand in which district they now live and which candidates are vying to represent them.

Those voters searching for ways to inform themselves will rely on the media—newspapers, television, and radio—for information on candidates. The media's role in our democratic process is to inform citizens of what is going on in their government. This includes what is happening during campaigns and their aftermath.

With advancing technology, people receive information from other sources too, including political blogs and Internet commentary, sometimes written by unknown sources or spokespersons on behalf of the candidates running for federal, state, county, and city offices. Some candidates now use social networking to campaign. The focus of these marketing efforts, no matter which media avenue is used, is to put the candidate in the best light possible to get him/her elected. If a message is one-sided, the source may be a candidate's campaign. It's not necessarily false, it's just incomplete.

Jim Davis, associate professor of American and Applied Politics at Oklahoma State University, says that in some elections "the only [media] coverage is . . . how [candidates] are doing on election night"—too little, too late to factor into voters' decisions. Local newspapers in small communities, however, usually provide more comprehensive information on the candidates in their areas. People in smaller towns can hear candidates on local radio stations, too. Davis calls this "Dollar a Holler" campaigning, where candidates pay to have their advertisements run on the smaller radio stations.

Much of this information—or lack of it—is dependent upon timely submissions and responses from candidates, and the accurate reporting of materials received or observed by the media. Unlike campaign-generated materials, the media's job is to observe and report objectively all sides of an issue or political race in order for the reader or viewer to reach his own conclusion. Modern technology has resulted in candidates often communicating with the media via email rather than face to face. In one way, this enables a candidate to reach a wider audience. But it makes it more difficult for the media to ask follow-up questions. A salient follow-up question may be ignored by a candidate reluctant to reply, making it difficult to delve deeper into an issue. Also lost in an Internet exchange is body language and other signs that the issue needs further investigation. Media reports that give

both sides of a particular issue can be trusted. Often, one side will have no comment, but at least the effort was made by the media to get the other side. Also, people should not confuse news reports on a candidate with editorial comments which express opinions.

When You Want to Know More

Besides the traditional news media, a voter can turn to Oklahoma government, ethics, and election websites to get more information. These websites can provide information on candidates and, equally important, who is backing them financially. These include the websites of the state House and Senate, the Oklahoma State Election Board, the League of Women Voters, and the State Ethics Commission. In July of every election cycle, the state House of Representatives publishes a synopsis explaining all the state questions that will be on Oklahoma's election ballot. To find it, visit: www.okhouse.gov; click on "House Publications" then "Research Publications." State and county political parties can also provide platform and biographical information on their candidates.

And voters can and will learn some things from the candidates themselves by attending public debates, town hall gatherings, and campaign appearances. Those opportunities may be a voter's best bet to ask questions or converse with candidates personally. Of course, voters will also have to vet printed campaign materials delivered directly to their homes, as well as recorded phone messages and ads from Political Action Committees (PACs), groups created to raise and spend money to elect or defeat candidates or ballot issues such as state questions. Examples of state questions include permitting liquor by the drink and a recent one to prohibit judges from using Sharia Law (Islamic Law) in deciding cases. Like all political advertising, voters will see just one side of the issue or candidate in a PAC advertisement.

Casting an Informed Vote

Want to be a more informed voter? Make the effort to find out as much as you can about candidates and the issues being debated. Make your vote your own. Voters who stay home on Election Day are letting those who do vote make the decisions. Have a voice in an issue by casting your ballot. The only way to really have your voice heard is to actually vote! ➔

2012 Oklahoma Election Schedule:

- Tuesday, March 6: Presidential Preferential Primary Election
- Tuesday, June 26: Primary Election
- Tuesday, August 28: Runoff Primary Election
- Tuesday, November 6: General Election