

Not quite a ringing endorsement for endorsements

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By **Carly Q. Romalino/Gloucester County Times**

Political endorsements from labor, environmental and education groups can certainly make a candidate feel good.

But nabbing the badges of support before Nov. 8 doesn't necessarily predict a win for the candidate who can rattle of a list of big-time backers. For voters, though, an endorsement could be a clue to what the candidate — newcomer or incumbent — is all about or how they've voted during the last term.

"In the old days, it was assumed that getting newspaper endorsements was very valuable because it meant votes. Candidates would list in their ads all the newspapers that endorsed them. The assumption was that would translate to votes on election day," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

Now, Mandel has noticed that it's anybody's game when the polls open. Voters are tending to side less with the picks of their labor unions and community groups.

Despite the disconnect between endorsements and election outcome, seasoned candidates continue to pitch for support, flash their endorsements on ads, and use an organization's approval as a way to reach voters with specific values.

Plus, the thumbs-up from a well-respected group could help a newcomer forge an identity when they don't yet have a voting record.

"I'm looking forward to being endorsed by many people," said Washington Township Councilman Giancarlo D'Orazio, a Republican who will make his first attempt at a 4th Legislative District state Senate seat in November. "It's going to be beneficial regardless if you are a new person or if you were there for a while."

D'Orazio could be considered a newcomer in the state Senate scene, and he's already working to grab nods from Philadelphia and local newspapers, as well as South Jersey businesses. Securing endorsements has become part of his campaign strategy along with door-knocking and meeting prospective constituents face-to-face, he said.

"The best way they can get to know me is by shaking my hand," he said.

The next best way to earn some credibility, and the quickest way to translate his values to Fourth District voters, is by securing an endorsement, according to the councilman.

"It's just information for the voters," D'Orazio said. "If someone endorses you, they get to know more about you."

An endorsement shows that "people believe in you," he said.

Besides, "Someone with no one endorsing him or her stands alone," said Mandel. "A candidate with many endorsements stands by supporters and protectors, people and organizations who might be willing to speak for that candidate. It gives you an identity and credibility."

But an endorsement is only as good as the effort the supporters put toward the campaign, according to State Senate President Stephen Sweeney.

"I don't see a whole lot of value in endorsements. ... Unless they are going to get involved, it's just another name to add to the list. ... They make you feel good, but depending on the effort the group is putting in, that will make a difference in how valuable it is," said Sweeney, D-3, of West Deptford. "Efforts put forward by those groups [determine] whether it's meaningful."

In Sweeney's experience, he has run into bogus groups made up of just a handful of members — or fewer — that were actually created by political parties to add an endorsement to a candidate's campaign literature.

Then, at the opposite end of the scale, legitimate organizations have encouraged their members to volunteer to work on his campaign.

"The least is they [endorsers] do nothing. The most [participation] has been that a lot of members come out, put as much money as they are legally allowed into the campaign, and send out mailers to their membership," Sweeney said. "I've had that a lot of times."

With election campaigns kicking up and about six weeks to go until the big day, Sweeney has already wrangled an endorsement from the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council, which represents all of the labor unions in South Jersey. Plus, he's snatched the New Jersey State Building and Construction Trades Council endorsement.

He did not get the New Jersey AFL-CIO nod this year.

"It's a message about support, support with votes and support with funding," Mandel said. "Time, people and money – that's what every candidate needs. Endorsements help to bring time, people and money to the campaign."

The efficacy of the endorsement doesn't just rest on the organization that grants its blessing, according to Sen. Jeff Van Drew. A candidate can't ride the endorsements to a win on Nov. 8.

"The efficacy of it depends on what the candidate does as well," he said.

But having an association with a particular set of values in a candidate's corner could help sway a few undecided voters, according to Van Drew.

"Many Republicans or Democrats, if they don't know their candidates, will vote their party," said Van Drew, D-1, of Cape May, who was also recently endorsed by the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council, and received nods from the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, Central Labor Council of Atlantic and Cape May counties, the Recreational Fishing Alliance and an association of commercial fishermen. "If you don't know the candidates very well, [endorsements] might move you one way or another."

Sweeney and Van Drew agree that an endorsement is always flattering, but neither legislator worries too much about seals of approval at election time.

"They are obviously not necessary for victory," Van Drew said. "I don't believe you should worry too much about them as a candidate or as an elected official. You should be making the decisions you make based upon what serves the constituency of the state, to the best of your ability."

"Sometimes," he noted, "that pleases those who endorse, and sometimes it displeases them."