

# 'The issue cops

## *Ranking Specter and Yeakel on substance*

The race between Republican U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and Democratic challenger Lynn Yeakel may be shaping up as a bare-knuckle brawl, but it took a short breather this week to address the principal concerns of the Pennsylvania electorate.

In back-to-back sessions Sunday in Pittsburgh, the candidates submitted to questioning by 18 ordinary citizens from western Pennsylvania. No talk of Sen. Specter's interrogation of Anita Hill, or of what Ms. Yeakel's pastors did or didn't say about Israel — issues that are being used by partisans to inspire fund-raising appeals. Rather, the talk was all about jobs and the economy, health care and education.

For this brief respite from traditional mud-slinging, credit is due to Pennsylvania's League of Women Voters. The League assembled the 18 westerners as a so-called "citizens' jury," an experiment born in the Midwest to stimulate citizen-involvement in elections. The jury's charge: to consult experts on the issues, question the candidates and then offer a verdict — a rating, actually — on each issue. The westerners rated Sen. Specter higher on jobs and education, while giving Ms. Yeakel the edge regarding health care.

A similar panel from the eastern

half of the state was hard at work this week at Philadelphia's Society Hill Sheraton, talking to experts on the three topics. Their turn to question the candidates comes Sunday at 9 a.m., and the public is very much welcome. The morning-long session will be carried live on WHYY 91-FM and broadcast Monday evening on C-SPAN from 8 to 11 p.m.

What special insight can these average Pennsylvanians have about the candidates and issues? Probably no more than any other well-read citizens, but that's the whole point — to loose a jury of their peers on candidates for elected office. The goal, in the words of Diane Edmundson, president of the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters, is "to reconnect citizens with their government and elected officials with governing."

It's hard to say whether the jury's "verdicts" will have any impact on the election. This is, after all, a high-profile contest in which a wide range of issues and considerations come into play. It's also true that a candidate can have great positions on the issues, yet lack credibility or the political savvy to get them enacted.

But the juries' activities add an intriguing new element to the mix that can only enrich the political process.