



LEAGUE BASICS

On League Structure

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Preface

The League of Women Voters is a volunteer organization that does a professional job. The League tackles important public issues and is a respected, trusted asset in cities and towns across the country. League leaders empower others to define and accomplish goals—for themselves, for the organization, for their communities and for the nation. Guided by these goals, the organization fulfills its mission and grows.

Introduction

The League of Women Voters is a volunteer, grassroots, non-partisan, multi-issue organization dedicated to promoting informed and active participation in the political process. The League is organized at the local, state, and national levels. Members joining at the local level automatically become members of the state and national Leagues.

The League was founded in 1920 to help American women, newly enfranchised by the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, exercise their new right to vote in an informed way. Today the League continues to help all voters register, learn about the candidates and issues, and vote. Through news articles, information booths, written candidate guides and public candidate forums or debates, members carry on the League tradition. To assure objectivity at election time, every attempt is made to separate voter service from lobbying and ACTION efforts. In addition, League meetings, publications, films, and speakers pass on to other groups and the public the wealth of information on issues that the League produces. Helping the entire community become informed and active citizens is one of the goals of the League. This document presents information on the structure and operation of Leagues at all levels.

How Does the League Work?

The basic component of the League is the UNIT, a small group of people meeting to exchange opinions, hear speakers, and participate in League PROGRAMs through study, discussion and action. Smaller local Leagues usually have one unit, while larger Leagues, either in number of members or the geographic area they cover, are more likely to form several units.

What Is League Program?

Program consists of specific issues chosen for study and support. Members at each unit suggest issues for study; then members of the local Leagues at their annual meetings--or state and national Leagues at their conventions--decide which items to adopt for study at each respective level.

Once an issue has been chosen, a STUDY COMMITTEE gathers extensive information about the topic from a variety of sources so members can become informed enough to reach CONSENSUS on the issue. (See the League Basics document on Committees, for more information about their organization and function.)

Reaching Consensus

Each study committee prepares an article for publication in the League's monthly newsletter, *The Voter*, and also presents the information to members at a briefing meeting. Members volunteer to "take" this information to the individual units for presentation and discussion.

The study committee combines the results of the unit meetings and presents a draft consensus position to the board based on members' input from the unit meetings. After discussion and possible modification, the League board approves the consensus. Reaching consensus on a position is a process that seeks some degree of agreement through group discussion. Consensus is not a simple majority, nor is it unanimity; it provides an overall sense of the group's position.

With each unit doing this, it is possible to find out what members think on the whole, but the minority opinion will also surface. If the state League is studying the topic, usually on a statewide issue, then it becomes a state consensus and, similarly, a national consensus if the study was conducted at that level on a national issue. In all cases, the consensus is reached through local Leagues participating at their local meetings. From the consensus comes the statement of what the League supports or opposes – the position.

What Happens to a League Position?

Coming to consensus and formulating a statement of support is just the beginning of League action. One of the League's purposes is to act on political issues for which the League has specific positions. Action to support League positions begins with members spreading interest and information to family, friends, neighbors and other community organizations.

Action is also taken by supporting or opposing legislation that addresses a League position. This can mean lobbying the city council, state legislature and the U.S. Congress by writing letters, as individuals, to elected officials. A League president or board member may speak for the League as a whole by writing letters, testifying, or lobbying in the hope of seeing a League position implemented at the appropriate level of government. The League may take action through litigation and go to court in the public interest. In all of these activities, the League forms coalitions with other organization to bring about change.

Why Do Officials Listen to the League?

The League has influence because League members are known to do their homework. League publications, based on well-researched studies, are known to give the pertinent background and pros and cons necessary for informed decision-making. League is nonpartisan and does not endorse candidates. League members are encouraged to become OBSERVERS at meetings of governmental bodies, to monitor their activities, and to update the members on how the public is being served by their elected officials.

Questions About The League

Who is Eligible?

Everyone is eligible to attend meetings, contribute financially, use League publications and become informed. *Voting members* must be 16 years old, who have *paid their dues*. Members belong to all levels of League – local, state and national and other interleague groups.

What Happens to My Dues?

Dues are collected annually. The amount is recommended by the board of directors and voted at the Annual Meeting when the budget is adopted. Dues and other fundraising efforts support the other levels of League through per-member payments (PMP) and finance publications and other League activities. (See the League Basics document on the Budget and Membership Dues.)

What Does the League Expect of Me?

Participation in the League ranges from those who only pay their dues to those who live and breathe the League. Each member has to decide how much time to give. A member should try to:

Attend LWV meetings for membership and the public. Read the background materials; join in the discussion; express your views. Your opinion counts.

Communicate with elected officials as an individual, using the facts you learned through the League to reinforce your views.

What If I Can't Be Active?

Some members can't be very active. The League provides plenty of opportunities for short-term commitments. Volunteer for a job that fits your time and capabilities. And if you can't do that, just be a member. This is a political organization, and numbers count. And besides, you'll grow and learn, regardless.

What's In It For Me?

It depends on you. The League has been a training ground for many members who have run for political office or gone into other volunteer work or public service jobs. The League offers you dozens of ways to express your ideas, interests, and talents. Opportunities to learn and serve include research and writing, monitoring or lobbying governmental bodies, interviewing candidates and leaders, and leading discussions. The League is a tool to be used by members to further their opportunities and causes. Make the League work for you.

How Do I Join a Committee?

Committees are self-selected. All members are more than welcome to join any committee, anytime. Chairpersons are always looking for interested people. (See the League Basics document on Committees.)

What If I Don't Agree With A League Position?

If you disagree with a League position, you are perfectly free to act in opposition, provided you do so as an individual and do not identify yourself as a League member. The League is a multi-issue organization, and you may not agree with all its positions. However, you will probably agree with many of them.

LEAGUE-LEVEL DEFINITIONS

ACTION – whatever the League does, at every level of government, to implement its program. This usually means advocacy on positions, but can also include encouraging citizen participation.

BOARD – the group of members who serve as officers and directors, who are either elected or appointed. Each level of League has its board with members who are usually assigned specific tasks, but who share the overall responsibility for setting policy and organizing activities.

CALL TO ACTION – a request to all members to participate in a concerted effort to implement a League position. Members are asked to write or call their elected officials requesting a specific vote on legislation. May also be called a “Time for Action.”

CONSENSUS – agreement among a substantial number of members (not just a majority). Expressed in terms of broad objectives, consensus is not tied to specific legislation, but is general enough to serve as a standard for evaluating and monitoring legislation.

EDUCATION FUND – the tax-exempt, tax-deductible arm of the League, established to accept contributions to fund educational and citizen-information projects. Regular contributions to the League are not tax-deductible because we are a political organization and lobby to influence legislation.

FUNDRAISING – the way League finances most of its budget. This can be done through direct solicitation of contributions or through other fundraising events, as needed.

GRASSROOTS – at member meetings, all League members have an opportunity to decide what position the League will take on an issue and can suggest program topics and bylaw changes for all levels of League. All members are also encouraged to attend the Annual Meeting to participate in the adoption of local program, budget, and bylaw changes as well as the election of the local board. This board selects delegates who make these decisions at the state and national conventions.

LOBBYIST – a League member who promotes League positions in local, state, or national legislative or executive departments. Because spokespersons for the League must reflect the consensus position, they are under continuing supervision of the appropriate board.

NONPARTISAN POLICY – the League as an organization does *not* support individual candidates or political parties. Members are encouraged to be active in the party of their choice, but board members’ personal political behavior must not endanger the League’s nonpartisan image.

OBSERVER – a League member who regularly attends meetings of governmental bodies and reports on how they function and their actions on League issues.

POSITION – a statement of what League supports or opposes on the basis of a particular consensus. The appropriate League board formulates the position statement after careful compilation of the consensus meeting results. Continued support of each position is reaffirmed at the biennial state and national conventions, or at the local annual meeting.

PROGRAM – issues chosen by members for study and action. At each level of League, program includes items adopted for current study or action.

PUBLICATIONS – an array of written materials from every level of League. They are the basic tools to help members study, discuss, and take action, and they help all citizens to be better informed voters through as wide a community distribution as possible. Written or film publications which present factual material and do not indicate a League position may be financed through tax-deductible contributions to cover cost of printing and distribution.

STUDY COMMITTEE – a group of interested League members who study or update a program topic.

UNIT – small groups in local Leagues that meet regularly to participate in League program at convenient times and places.

VOTER SERVICE – the League’s continuing activity to help all citizens become informed voters and participate in the democratic process.

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