

Welcome to the League of Women Voters

WHAT IS LEAGUE?

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, has fought since 1920 to improve our systems of government and impact public policies through education and advocacy. The League's enduring vitality and resonance comes from its unique decentralized structure. The League is a grassroots organization, working at the national, state and local levels

The League encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters is nonpartisan; it neither supports nor opposes candidates for office at any level of government. At the same time, the League is wholeheartedly political and works to influence policy through advocacy. It is the original grassroots citizen network, directed by the consensus of its members nationwide. There are 850 Leagues nationally -- in all 50 states, DC and the Virgin Islands -- and we have 150,000 members & supporters-- comprising a vast grassroots lobby corps that can be mobilized when necessary.

WHAT DOES THE LWV DO?

EDUCATION

Voter Service/Citizen Information: The LWV is perhaps best known for its services to voters. Voter service activities include: conducting voter registration drives; providing voting information to the public; sponsoring candidate forums and getting out the vote on Election Day. In print and on-line, the LWV provides information necessary to inform the electorate through community handbooks, voters' guides, and political directories and in depth studies of governmental policy issues. Community organizations often call upon the LWV for assistance in organizing and moderating forums or for testimony on public policy issues.

Study: LWVs at each level choose issues for their members to study. Criteria considered when selecting study programs include: The issue must be one on which governmental action is needed. The issue must fall within the principles of the LWV. The issue must inspire member interest and commitment. Duplication of effort must be avoided. Funds, time, and people must be available to do a thorough job. Final decisions on state and national programs are made by a vote of the delegates to the respective conventions. At the local level, the voting members in attendance at the annual meeting perform this function. Through its consensus process, the LWV examines all aspects of a selected subject and tries to reach agreement on which to base a position. The LWV's reputation for fairness rests on its practice of thorough and impartial study. Members discuss the issues; pros and cons are researched; and everyone has an opportunity to express an opinion. Once the LWV has a position on an issue, material is

published to promote that position, always ensuring the distinction between LWV action on specific issues and the League's nonpartisan voter information.

ACTION AND ADVOCACY

Once a position has been determined, the LWV board coordinates and oversees LWV action. Action includes lobbying elected officials, working with other organizations and in coalitions, testifying at public hearings; litigating to help clarify laws in the public interest; monitoring elections and other government activities. The LWV publicizes its positions through the media, petition drives and special issue campaigns, public forums, panel discussions, and LWV publications.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The results of LWV studies and action are conveyed to the public via the printed and electronic media, including use of the Internet. The League uses press conferences, radio and television programs, statements to governmental bodies, press releases, op ed articles, meetings with editorial boards and members' enthusiasm to promote the LWV's mission.

COMMUNICATIONS/PUBLICATIONS

Effective communications is an important tool the League uses to achieve its goals. In addition to websites for the local, county, state and U.S. each league has numerous brochures, studies and reports. Local bulletins and e-newsletters are published frequently. The *Illinois Voter*, the publication of the League of Women Voters of Illinois (LWVIL) is available online at the League's Web site at www.lwvil.org. And Information about the national League (LWVUS) can be found at www.lwv.org.

OBSERVER CORPS

The LWV encourages observers to attend meetings of various local, regional, state, and national governmental bodies. Observers do not speak for the LWV but attend meetings to listen, learn, and make factual reports of the proceedings. The observer program has earned the LWV a reputation as a fair and accurate civic monitor.

SPEAKERS BUREAU

Many LWVs have members who are available to speak on LWV issues to organizations.

HOW DOES THE LWV FUNCTION

"Program" in the League of Women Voters is the agenda of public policy issues that will receive the League's focused attention for a period of time. Members decide which issues should be emphasized for a one- or two-year "program" period. The issues may be new to the League's process of study and position adoption, or they may include old positions which need revision, deletion, re-study, or more vigorous action.

The members' recommendations are reviewed by the Board of Directors who adopts the issues for concerted emphasis by the members. These may be voted upon at the annual meeting. This slate of issues –the program - becomes the compass for League

work for the next two years. This can involve research, establishing consensus, taking a position, presenting information, and many forms of advocacy.

Study

When the League's members have decided which issue to study locally, a committee of members is formed with a chair to fully study it through research, interviews, participation in governmental hearings, and attending conferences. The results of the study are presented to the members in the form of a report as well as in unit meetings for discussion and consensus on what position members decide the League should take, if any.

Positions

Positions are established after members have studied issues of significance and achieved agreement on policies. This is consensus—the agreement of the majority that adoption of this position would best serve the public interest. Positions are periodically reviewed for current relevance. Without study and consensus on a given issue, the League has no position and takes no stand. The summary of LWVIL positions is called *Where We Stand* and the LWVUS version is called *Impact on Issues*. Both are available on the respective websites lwwil.org and lww.org

Action/Advocacy

When a position is taken, the League works to translate the position into reality through the political process. Action may take the form of lobbying, coalition building, speaking out, publishing materials (including letters to the editor, press releases, letters and e-mails), testifying, sponsoring forums, and monitoring of governmental activity.

Although the League is a nonpartisan organization and does not support or oppose any political party or any candidate, it does, however, take action on selected issues once they have been through the rigorous process of attaining status as League positions.

It is important to understand that speakers and publications supporting a position that the League has taken after careful study are not the same speakers and publications which the League uses to disseminate impartial information to voters as a service to help them make informed decisions.

The Board of Directors decides the timing of action as well as the kind and degree of action the League will undertake. Often this will take the form of a "Call to Action" which notifies members that it is a particularly opportune time to express their opinions to representatives on measures affecting a position.

Annual/Biennial Meeting

This is a special type of general membership meeting held at the national, state, county, and local levels, and is the forum where members determine the following: adoption of the current program; election of officers, directors, and members of the nominating committee for the coming year; adoption of a budget for the coming year

Briefings/Trainings

When appropriate, LWVIL conducts training for resource persons to discuss specific subjects at unit meetings, or for speakers to participate at public meetings or at other community organizations (such as impartial presentation of supporting and opposing arguments on upcoming ballot measures).

HOW DOES THE LWV FINANCE ITS ACTIVITIES?

The LWV is a nonprofit organization that relies primarily on dues and contributions to operate and to achieve its goals. Support comes from members, nonmembers, the community at large, gifts, foundation grants, corporate contributions, and contracts. Since the LWV is a lobbying organization, donations for advocacy activities and League membership dues are not tax-deductible. Each local LWV decides the amount of its dues and the method for collecting them. From its funds, the local LWV pays a Per-Member-Payment (PMP) to support the national, state and regional LWVs. The LWV also conducts fundraising campaigns at each level.

Part of the League's financial support comes from the LWV Education Fund. Both the Education Fund at the state level and national level qualify as 501(c) (3) organizations under the Internal Revenue Code and may accept tax-deductible contributions. These funds are used exclusively for educational projects such as providing services to voters, producing impartial information on governmental issues, publishing study guides, and conducting educational and research projects.

HOW IS THE LEAGUE ORGANIZED?

Membership: Full membership is open to all citizens of voting age, male and female, with associate memberships also available in certain situations. Joining the League at the local level automatically confers membership at other levels (county, state and national) and with that the opportunity to work on issues and voter service. Each member has a direct voice in the selection of officers and program. The LWV is committed to diversity, recognizing that diverse perspectives are important and necessary for responsible and representative decision making in a democracy. Diversity also enhances the organization's ability to respond more effectively to changing conditions and needs.

- **Voting members** are citizens at least 18 years old.
- **Household members** are two members living at the same address.
- **Associate members** are persons who are under 18 years old or who are noncitizens.
- **Members-at-Large (MAL)** live outside the area of and are not enrolled in any local LWV, but are members of the state and national LWV.
- **Life members** are voting members who have belonged to the League for 50 years. Life members pay no dues.

Board of Directors: At each level of LWV, boards are elected by the membership to manage the activities of the League. In addition to the elected officers, the board is composed of elected and appointed directors. The number and manner of their election is outlined in the bylaws of that LWV. Each board member usually has a specific area of responsibility, such as program, voter service, membership, finance, bulletin, public relations, publications, action or advocacy.

Committees: There are two types of committees: study committees and standing committees. Study committees study a public issue of LWV concern. They research, clarify, and develop a focus for LWV consideration. Their responsibility is to present facts to the members. Standing committees carry out the balance of the LWV's work in voter service, membership and budget.

Meetings: Each local LWV determines its own schedule, but most meet at least once a month. Each local LWV holds an annual meeting to elect officers, to set local dues, and to adopt local program, bylaws, and budget. All members can and should attend the annual meetings.

Conventions and Councils: The national convention is held every other year (in even years) and the state convention is held in odd-numbered years. Both are comprised of delegates elected by local LWVs in numbers proportionate to their membership. Any League member is eligible to serve as a convention delegate. Observers and guests may attend but may not vote. Delegates debate and vote on program, budget, financial support and bylaws, and elect officers for the next biennium.

WHAT HAS THE LWV DONE?

National: The League was formed when women gained the right to vote with passage of the 19th amendment in 1920. The League's primary focus from its beginning was on voter education, registration and the process of voting.

State: The League of Women Voters of Illinois follows the operation of state government.

Regional: Local LWVs in Cook and Lake County have formed county inter-League organizations (ILOs). Issues addressed by these groups include county government structure and services, juvenile services and the courts, forest preserves and land use.

Local: Forty-four local LWVs have spearheaded improvements in the structure and efficiency of their local governments and the quality of life in their communities.

Moving Forward

In 2009 the League at the national level (LWVUS) is focusing on public policy issues of national scope. Examples of action on national positions include campaign finance reform, civil liberties, election administration, and ethics and lobbying reform, global climate change, health care reform and tax policy. The League in Illinois (LWVIL) is concentrating its efforts on statewide issues including state fiscal policy and school funding, campaign finance reform and climate change. In recent years we conducted a study on immigration. In 2009 LWVIL studied the need for calling a

constitutional convention, reached consensus to oppose the calling of a convention and worked successfully in coalition to defeat its passage. In 2009 LWWIL received a grant from the Joyce Foundation to work to ensure a complete count for Census 2010.

LEAGUE LINGO

There are certain terms that are unique to the League of Women Voters- "League Lingo." Some are listed here to help new members.

ACTION: Promoting the League's positions on local, state and national public policy issues to government officials, the media and the public.

ACTION ALERT: Request from the LWWUS or state League to take action in support of a League position.

CONSENSUS: Collective opinion of a substantial number of League members, representative of the membership as a whole, after objective study of an issue.

CONCURRENCE: Agreement by League members with a position on an issue reached by a small group of members or by another League.

EDUCATION FUND: The tax-deductible arm of national, state and large local Leagues, handling funds to be used only for educational purposes, not for action on issues.

ILO: Acronym for an Inter-League Organization, formed by local Leagues within a county, metropolitan area or region to act on issues that are beyond the local League area in scope.

MAL: Acronym for Member-At-Large, a member who resides outside the area of, and is not enrolled in, a local League.

MAL UNIT: A state-recognized group of Members-At-Large, in an area where there is no local League.

PMP: Acronym for Per Member Payment, the amount of money paid to the LWWUS and the state League on behalf of each member.

POSITION: A statement of the League's point of view on an issue, arrived at through member study and agreement (consensus or concurrence), approved by the appropriate board and used as a basis for League action.

PROGRAM: Selected governmental issues chosen by members at the local, state and national levels for study and action.

PROGRAMS: Plans for speakers, discussion or other activities for League meetings.

VOTERS SERVICE: Year-round activity to help citizens be politically effective and to encourage their participation in the political process. Registering voters and presenting

factual, nonpartisan information on candidates and election issues are basic voters' service activities. *Voter Services activities include coordinating and moderating candidate forums at state and local levels of government.*

Local Leagues in Illinois

Chicago & Cook County

Arlington Heights / Mt. Prospect /
Buffalo Grove
Barrington Area
Chicago
Dolton / Harvey / Riverdale
Evanston
Glencoe
Glenview
Homewood / Flossmoor Area
La Grange Area
Oak Park / River Forest
Palatine Area
Palos / Orland Area
Park Forest Area
Park Ridge
Wilmette
Winnetka / Northfield/ Kenilworth

Waukegan / Zion MAL
Wheaton

Northern Illinois

Freeport
Jo Daviess County
Kewanee Area
Rochelle
Rockford

Southern Illinois

Alton MAL
Collinsville
Edwardsville Area
Jackson County

Collar Counties

Batavia
Carpentersville / Dundee Area
Deerfield / Lincolnshire
Downers Grove / Woodridge / Lisle
Elgin Area
Elmhurst
Geneva / St. Charles
Glen Ellyn
Highland Park
Lake Forest / Lake Bluff Area
McHenry County
Naperville

Central Illinois

Adams County
Champaign County
Coles County
McDonough County
McLean County
Morgan County
Greater Peoria
Springfield MAL

County Level Leagues

Cook County
Lake County

League of Women Voters of Illinois
332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1150
Chicago, Illinois 60604
Phone: 312-939-5935
Fax: 312-939-6887
Web site: lwvil.org
Email: info@lwvil.org

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