

LWV and LWVHC MEMBER HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

Membership in the League can lead to self-education, an understanding of community problems, and the ability to act effectively on issues of public interest. The League's purpose, its open membership, its independence from partisan politics, and its democratic procedures attract women and men of all ages and backgrounds.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the League of Women Voters is to promote political responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government and to act on selected governmental issues.

HISTORY

In 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt, a native Iowan, organized the League of Women Voters of the United States. The League's first goal was to teach women how to exercise their new right to vote. The scope was soon enlarged to include service to all citizens. Political action based on knowledge gained from study became the cornerstone of the League's diverse agenda.

NONPARTISANSHIP

The League may take political action on issues on which members reach agreement. The League never supports or opposes any political party or candidate for elective office. However, while the League encourages its members, as individuals, to take part fully in the political policy, the League takes action in the public interest.

MEMBERSHIP

League membership is open to any person who subscribes to the purpose and principles of the LWV. The LWV of Henderson County 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 persons over 16 years old.
- **Family members** are two or more members living at the same address.
- **Associate members** are persons who are under 16 years old.
- **Life members** are voting members who have belonged to the League for 50 years. Life members pay no dues.

ORGANIZATION

The League of Women Voters works on local, state, and national levels. Members of the local League elect their Officers and Board of Directors at an annual meeting. Each local league is entitled to send delegates to state and national conventions. For all three levels of League, local members decide what will be studied, what action will be taken, how League money will be spent, and who League leaders will be. The League is a grassroots organization and members are very protective of this approach.

MEETINGS

- Each local League determines its own schedule, but most meet at least once a month.
- Each local League holds an annual meeting to elect officers, to set local dues, and to adopt local programs, bylaws, and budget. All members are encouraged to attend to exercise their individual vote on all issues presented.

CONVENTIONS AND COUNCILS

- A national convention is held every other year in even years.
- A state convention is held in odd-numbered years

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- Both are comprised of delegates elected by local Leagues 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.
- The National Council is held in odd-numbered years. It is composed of two delegates from each state plus the National Board of Directors.
- The State Council (even years, held just before the National convention) meetings are held and local Leagues elect voting delegates to attend proportionate to their membership.

PRINCIPLES

The League of Women Voters believes in representative government and in the individual liberties established in the Constitution of the United States.

The League of Women Voters believes that democratic government depends upon the informed and active participation of its citizens and requires that governmental bodies protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of the proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making public records accessible.

The League of Women Voters believes that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote; that every person should have access to free public education which provides equal opportunity for all, and that no person or group should suffer legal, economic, or administrative discrimination.

The League of Women Voters believes that responsible government should be responsive to the will of the people; that government should maintain an equitable and flexible system of taxation, promote the conservation and development of natural resources in the public interest, share in the solution of economic and social problems which affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy, and adopt domestic policies which facilitate the solution of international problems.

The League of Women Voters believes that cooperation with other nations is essential in the search for solutions to world problems and that the development of international organization and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

PROGRAM

League program at every level consists of those governmental issues that members choose for concentrated study and action. At each year's Program Planning meeting, members discuss their ideas for local, state, and national program. Their proposals are submitted to the respective Boards of Directors. The board at each level then considers the proposals forwarded to it, formulates a recommended program, and presents it to the membership at the annual meeting or to the delegates at the state or national convention. There is also a procedure for placing not recommended items before the meeting.

Certain criteria must be used when considering a program. The issue must fall within the Principles of the League and be one on which governmental action can be taken. Final decisions on state and national program are made by a vote of the delegates to the respective conventions. At the local level this is done by the voting members in attendance at the annual meeting.

Once study has been adopted, the board appoints a chairperson of the "resource", or study committee. This person in turn finds other members to serve on the committee. Taking part in a study is an excellent way to become familiar with and involved in the League.

The resource committee gathers information on the study item, analyzes the information, clarifies the issues, and identifies the problems. It is the committee's responsibility to present all sides of the issue to members for their consideration. The study may also include tours, guest speakers, interviews, and other activities.

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Before the League can act on the issue, members must agree in broad terms on various aspects of the issue. To formulate a position, the League reaches consensus. Consensus, or agreement, is reached through group discussion. Members come to an overall “sense of the group” as expressed through the exchange of ideas and opinions. It is from this agreement that League formulates a position statement for action.

Another process for obtaining a League position is through the process of concurrence or agreeing with a proposed statement. League members of boards can concur with recommendations or statement from a task force, a resource committee, or any League board, another local board, any state board, or the national board.

ACTION

Once members reach agreement and a position is stated, local, state, or national Leagues take action by:

- Lobbying
- Working with other organizations
- Speaking out through letter-writing and email campaigns to legislators and through personal visits to legislators and administrative agencies
- Publishing and distributing pertinent materials
- Testifying at legislative and administrative hearings to assure citizen input in policy-making decisions
- Monitoring elections and other government activities
- Litigating to help clarify laws in the public interest

The League observes meetings of local, regional, state, and national governmental bodies. Observers do not speak for the League but attend meetings to listen, to learn, and to make factual reports of the proceedings.

VOTER SERVICE

The League is perhaps best known for its varied services to voters. The League directs its efforts toward encouraging citizens to register, to vote, and to take part in government and politics. Voter Service activities include sponsoring candidate forums, debates, or interviews; conducting voter registration drives; providing information about voting to the public through the print and electronic media, and getting out the vote on election day.

CITIZEN INFORMATION

Educating citizens about government is a major League activity. Through community handbooks, political directories, and factual studies of governmental issues, the League provides information necessary for an informed electorate. Community organizations often call upon the League for speakers on selected topics about government.

PUBLICATIONS

Various publications that are researched, written, and distributed by members at every level are important tools to aid in carrying out League’s goals. These can be accessed easily through the National, State, and Local websites. Information on purchasing publications by members or public is included.

FINANCE

The League is a nonprofit organization that must have adequate financing to operate and to achieve its goals. Local Leagues adopt budgets that include funds to support local, state, and national activities. Financial support comes from members, non members, and the community at large.

Dues are a major income factor in local League budgets. Each local League decides the amount of its dues and the method for collecting them, usually the annual system in which all members pay dues at the beginning of the fiscal year in July. A large portion of the dues, called the PMP or “per member payment”, goes for the support of the state and national levels.

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To augment income for members, the League conducts fund-raising campaigns at each level. Monies collected can be designated by the donor to the general fund or to the CEF which is tax deductible. The Citizens Education Fund (CEF) at the National and State levels qualify as 501(c)(3) organizations under the Internal Revenue Code and may accept tax deductible contributions. These funds are used exclusively by Leagues for services to voters, impartial information on government issues, study guides, surveys, research projects, and litigation in the public interest. In NC, a percent of CEF funds may also be used for leadership training, i.e., funding a portion of council and convention delegate expense.

A HISTORY OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF NORTH CAROLINA THE EARLY YEARS

The League of Women Voters – and therefore also the North Carolina League of Women Voters – grew directly from the suffragist movement. Suffragists organized in North Carolina as early as 1913. However, women’s suffrage was never popular with North Carolina legislators, and they successfully defeated ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Finally, in 1971, North Carolina ratified the Amendment.

On September 23, 1920, Miss Gertrude Weil, President of the Equal Suffrage Association of North Carolina, called an organizational meeting for a State League of Women Voters. On Thursday, October 7, 1920, in Greensboro, the women assembled elected their first slate of officers and their first chairperson of committees – all seasoned suffragists. They also agreed that the Leagues within the State Leagues would be county Leagues.

The North Carolina League reported in 1930 that four leagues were celebrating their tenth birthdays: the Wake County League, The Duke University League, the Goldsboro League, and the Mecklenburg County League. There is no other evidence that the four were founded that early, and there is no positive evidence which League came first.

From the beginning, the North Carolina League of Women Voters was a small but formidable force in state government. It organized not only its members but also the women in other organizations throughout the state to bring their pressure to bear, particularly for education and the working child, raising the age of consent from 14 to 16, improving the justice system particularly for women and children, and surveying the working conditions of women in industry.

The State League began to falter in 1932. By 1936, apparently only the Mecklenburg League was still in existence and the National League no longer recognized the NC League of Women Voters.

In 1951, North Carolina women organized a new state league, this time called the League of Women Voters of North Carolina. It continues to this day.

For the 75th anniversary, the LWNVC published *In the Beginning: Notes for a History of the North Carolina League of Women Voters 1920-1950*, by Annell Houk, LWVCM.