



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF NEW JERSEY

A Handbook for Members

League of Women Voters of New Jersey

Our Mission Statement:

The League of Women Voters of New Jersey, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

Welcome to the League of Women Voters!

You are now a member of a vital and historic organization. The League has local, state and national levels, parallel to our three levels of government, and you are now a member of all three. You can work on local issues through your local League, state issues through the state League (LWVNJ), and on national issues through the national League (LWVUS).

Anyone who supports the mission of the League is welcome and we strive to represent the entire community. In order to be a voting member, you must be at least 18 years old and a U.S. citizen. However, associate membership is open to everyone.

In addition to meeting others who are also passionate about civic engagement, you will have many opportunities to learn new skills and learn about public policy issues.

After some training, you can participate in as many activities as you have time and interest. They include (but are not limited to) registering new voters, helping voters update their registration information, moderating candidates' forums, observing meetings of government bodies, sitting on statewide public policy committees, interviewing elected officials, and researching and/or presenting information about an issue under study by your local, state or national League.

As with any organization you join, attending meetings, participating in discussions, and giving financial support beyond your dues are encouraged.

The goal of the League of Women Voters is to empower people to shape better communities worldwide.

We:

- Build citizen participation in the democratic process
- Study key issues at all government levels and act on them after members have come to agreement

- Engage communities in promoting positive solutions to public policy issues through education and advocacy

We believe in:

- Respect for individuals
- The value of diversity
- The power of collective decision making for the common good, both within the League and in communities

We strive to:

- Act with trust, integrity and professionalism
- Operate in an open and effective manner to meet the needs of those we serve, both our members and the public
- Actively seek diversity in our membership
- Acknowledge our heritage as we adapt to change and anticipate the future

Principles (Beliefs)

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

We believe that democratic government depends on 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 proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible.

We believe that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote; that every person should have access to free public education that provides equal opportunity for all; and that no person or group should suffer legal, economic or administrative discrimination.

We believe that efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibility, adequate financing and coordination among the different agencies and levels of government.

We believe that government should be responsive to the will of the people. It 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 that affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy and adopt domestic policies that facilitate the solution of international problems.

We believe that cooperation with other nations is essential in the search for solutions to world problems and that development of international organizations and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

League History

The League of Women Voters began formally as an organization in February 1920 in Chicago, six months before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote. A League of Women Voters of New Jersey was formed the same year.

In 1919 Carrie Chapman Catt had proposed a “League of Women Voters” when she spoke at the convention of the National American Suffrage Association in St. Louis. The Association had met to decide what to do after suffrage became a fact. Mrs. Catt called for a “living memorial” to the leaders of the fight for women’s suffrage and said, “Let us form a League of Women Voters, so that women may use their new freedom to make their nation safer for their children and their children’s children. . . .What should be done, what can be done, let us do.”

This new organization would strive to teach all the newly enfranchised women about the mechanics of registering and voting, nomination and the election procedures, and our form of government. The members also wanted to work for certain “needed legislation.” Education and advocacy were twin goals from the beginning.

The League has evolved from an organization concerned with *women’s needs* and with training *women voters* to one that is concerned with the *nation’s needs* and with training *all citizens*.

Non-Partisan and Grassroots

The League is a political organization, and we encourage our members to participate fully in the party of their choice. But the League does not support or oppose any political party or any candidate for public office, even those in non-partisan elections. League leaders who serve in more visible positions – President, Voters Service Chair and Membership Chair - are not permitted to support candidates in a public way (petitions, lawn signs, candidate coffees, etc.) .

Each League Board of Directors is responsible for drafting a specific nonpartisan policy and carrying it out in its community.

By "grassroots" we mean that each and every member of the League makes the policy decisions of the League. From local League annual meetings to state conventions and the national convention, members decide how it is to be run, who is to run it, and what we want to do (what policies we want to address). Members choose the Boards of Directors and the officers who are responsible for carrying out these decisions

Selection and Organization of Boards

Nominating committees of each level of League nominate directors and officers of their respective Boards, and members or delegates vote on them. Local Leagues hold elections at their Annual Meetings. Delegates from each local League elect state League officers and directors at state conventions, which are held in odd-numbered years. Delegates from each local and state League then select national officers and directors at national League conventions, held during even-numbered years.

These elected members may appoint as many additional directors as they consider necessary within the maximum allowed by their bylaws. Local League bylaws provide for the number of local board members, which varies from League to League, and at no level of League does the number of appointed directors exceed the number of elected directors. The League strives to be a democratic organization controlled by its membership.

Duties of Officers and Directors

Officers and directors carry overall responsibility for the management and activities of their League. They also usually have a specific job assignment, such as a program (advocacy) area, voters service or organizational job. In all instances they represent the general membership and carry out its decisions. They provide information, plan for discussion and promote action on local, state and national programs.

What is the member's place within the League?

Every member is a member of all three levels of League: national, state and local. Members work on local issues in the community through the local League, act on problems of state government through the state League and work on national governmental issues through the national League. If a local League is part of an ILO' (Inter-League Organization), a member could also work on the county level, a river basin or a multistate metropolitan region, depending on the geographic area represented by the ILO.

What kinds of activities are available for individual members?

There are many opportunities for individual League members to learn about the League, participate in its deliberations and express personal points of view:

Committees in the League can be local, state or national, and they offer members the opportunity to work on some League activity or to study a particular issue. Members can also work on state League "process" committees like budget and nominations or on program committees, like government, education, natural resources, immigration, fiscal policy or women and family issues. Program committees provide the expertise on their issues and recommend actions to the state board.

Workshops/Trainings/Forums are open to all members. They can focus on a particular policy area, assist members in various leadership roles, or both. They often feature guest speakers and panelists.

Monthly or semi-monthly meetings offer an opportunity for wide discussion and interchange of ideas and allow the board to inform members of its plans, to receive suggestions and to take votes.

Who is eligible for membership in the League of Women Voters?

Anyone who wants to become informed about issues and actively participate in the democratic process may join the League.

What are the kinds of membership in the League?

Voting members are citizens at least 18 years of age. *Nonvoting members* are associate members—those under 18 or noncitizens.

Who joins the LWV?

Anyone who supports the mission of the League: Your neighbor, friend, husband, wife or co-worker; those who share your political affiliation, and those who don't. There are no educational, social, economic, political or racial barriers to membership. The League strives to be representative of the entire community.

What do I receive for paying my dues?

When you pay your dues, you become a member of the national, state and local Leagues. The League offers you unlimited opportunities to make a difference, become a leader, and develop skills like researching issues, speaking in public, interviewing, organizing, and writing. It is also a way to form friendships and build professional networks based upon mutual enthusiasm and concerns.

Perhaps the most valuable benefit is becoming a better-informed and more effective citizen!

What are my responsibilities as a League member?

You may do as much or as little as you wish and have time for. All members are valuable to League. To get the most from your League membership you may want to:

- Attend meetings. Read the material. Participate in the discussion.
- Promote the League to nonmembers; bring a friend to meetings.
- Call or write your legislators as an individual, respectfully expressing your concerns about issues or you can respond to action alerts as a League member.

- Volunteer for a job that suits you. Your membership director can help you find activities that suit your interests and the time you have to give.
- Try to attend public meetings: school board, council, etc.
- Make contributions over and above your dues if you can.

How can I stay informed about League happenings, opportunities, advocacy, and news?

The best way to stay involved in the League is to participate at your local level. However, there are many ways to stay “in the know” for members that cannot attend meetings:

- Follow the League on social media: The League of Women Voters of the U.S. and the League of Women Voters of New Jersey are both active on Twitter and Facebook.
- Sign up for email newsletters: Information about happenings can be delivered to your inbox if you sign up for LWVNJ and LWVUS emails.
- Check out the Leagues’ websites. LWVNJ posts important information at www.lwvnj.org and LWVUS does so at www.lwv.org.
- Read the State Board Report: LWVNJ’s State Board reports out to its members following each board meeting.

What is Voters Service? (Yes, the League uses "voters" not "voter".

This is the League's year-round effort to help citizens become informed voters.

It may include:

Registering voters and providing voting information:

Using a variety of means, the League helps citizens register to vote. Dates, times, and place for registering and voting are publicized in an effort to alert all citizens to their voting rights and responsibilities.

Providing information on candidates:

The League helps citizens to vote more intelligently by furnishing “Voters Guides”—candidates’ replies to questions about selected issues—and by introducing candidates from all parties at a public meeting or “candidates forums.” Some of these events are aired on radio and/or television. As a nonpartisan organization that never endorses or opposes candidates, the League is particularly well qualified to offer these services.

Providing information on legislators:

The League does not forget elected officials after Election Day. We interview our representatives in the state legislature and U.S. Congress and share our points of view. We also publicize their voting records, informing the membership and the community of their positions on a variety of issues.

Assisting new voters:

We give special attention to newly naturalized citizens and to 18-year-olds in order to provide them with information on registration and voting procedures.

Providing election information:

We factually explain constitutional amendments, referenda and bond issues before elections. (When the League has taken a position on a ballot issue, information supporting its stand is prepared. However, such information is never used in voters service material, where the goal is, instead, to present *all* sides of the issue as clearly as possible.)

Operating a toll-free voters service hotline:

This LWVNJ service for the public provides election and registration information year-round. The number is 800-792-VOTE (8683).

Understanding representative government:

League members are encouraged to participate actively in political parties. The only limitations on such activity are those described under “Nonpartisanship.” There are also League publications and meetings designed to educate members and the public about our system of political parties.

Other activities:

These can include training in practical politics (like how to run for office), observing public bodies at work, assisting scout troops or classes working on government, and providing speakers for community organizations.

What are Program, Study and Action?

In League, "program" is not the agenda for a meeting or event. *Instead it means the collection of governmental issues that League members have chosen for concerted study and action.* The League program process is designed to involve the membership at almost every stage. You, the member, are given the opportunity to suggest the issues, choose the program, study the facts, agree on the position, and help take the action.

The principles of the League of Women Voters provide the authorization for adoption of program. Other criteria for choosing program items include:

- How much member interest exists?
- Is government action needed? Is it possible?
- Will League involvement make a difference?
- Do we have enough time and money?

Leagues work simultaneously on local, state and national issues. Local program includes items of interest to the local Leagues only; it is adopted at the local League annual meeting. State program is adopted at state convention, national program at national convention.

How is League Program chosen?

By explaining how national program is determined, we can demonstrate the principle behind choosing all levels of League program:

- About six months before the biennial convention, every member is alerted to the status of current program items and encouraged to suggest new ones. Local boards evaluate the suggestions received and forward them to the national program planning committee.

- This committee analyzes suggestions for new program items, as well as any continuing study and/or action on positions. They return a proposed program to local Leagues, who schedule program-planning meetings. Members vote their preferences, and the board sends the results to the national committee. The person(s) who will become the local League's convention delegate(s) participates along with all other members. The delegate(s) then goes to the convention informed of the group's decision, but not instructed to vote that way.
- Final decisions are made by delegates at convention. State and local program are determined the same way, although local program is voted on by all local members, not delegates. This is the League's way of making sure that each member has a full voice in determining program for study and action.

How do we study the issues?

Members have various opportunities to participate in League studies. If you are especially interested in the issue, you can join the resource committee in your League. It is responsible for the overall coordination of a particular program issue, from research and study through member decision and action. It will help League members get the information needed to make decisions as informed citizens, not as experts in the field, and it shares its research through reports and conducts discussion at a meeting.

What is Member Agreement?

Before the League can act, members must agree in broad terms to what they think about the issues, in order to develop criteria by which to evaluate proposed legislation or other governmental actions. *Consensus* is the process by which members reach agreement through group discussion of an issue. The consensus or agreement reached is not a simple majority, nor is it unanimity, but rather represents the "sense of the group" as expressed through the exchange of ideas and opinions.

Another way to reach member agreement is *concurrence*—agreeing with (or concurring with) a position previously arrived at. League members or board

can concur with recommendations of a resource committee, decision statements formulated by League board, or positions reached by other Leagues.

An opinion agreed upon by consensus or concurrence is called a *position*. Positions express the League's point of view and form the basis for League action. The appropriate board determines when and how to carry out action. Positions are worded in terms broad enough to enable the League, over a period of time, to initiate, support or oppose a variety of legislative and executive proposals.

What is League Action?

League leaders never take action before study and agreement. Leagues act only on current positions and on League principles. Actions can include testimony, letters and phone calls to legislators, working in coalition with other groups, community outreach and media campaigns.

Common League Acronyms

ILO	Inter-League Organization—an officially recognized level of League that is composed of Leagues within a county, metropolitan area or region. It is a group of Leagues, not individual members. ILO's adopt bylaws, a budget, elect a board of directors and choose program for study and action. In New Jersey all ILO's are organized on a county level.
LL's	Local Leagues
LWV	League of Women Voters
LWVEF	League of Women Voters Education Fund—a separate branch of the League to which tax-deductible monies may be contributed. These can be used solely on publications and projects of a strictly educational nature, with no League positions or lobbying efforts involved.
LWVNJ	League of Women Voters of New Jersey
LWVNJEF	League of Women Voters of New Jersey Education Fund (same requirement for strictly educational uses.)
LWVUS	League of Women Voters of the United States
MAL	Member-at-Large – a member of League who resides outside the area of a local League.
MLD	Membership and Leadership Development--a support system for helping local Leagues thrive. It involves all levels of the League.
PMP	Per Member Payment – a portion of each member's dues that supports their state and national membership. Local dues are set by the local Boards, but PMP is set at both state and national conventions.

Common League Definitions

Action Alert: A request sent to members when action (phone calls, letters, emails, etc.) is needed on an issue or legislation.

Citizen's Guide to Government: An annual LWVNJEF publication that includes information about voting and contact information for members' state and national legislators.

Concurrence: The League process of agreeing with a position already arrived at by resource committees, League boards or other Leagues.

Consensus: The League process of reaching member agreement through group discussion of an issue.

Convention: Held every two years for League delegates to adopt a program, elect officers and directors, amend bylaws and adopt a two-year budget. State Convention is held in May, during odd-numbered years. National Convention is held in even-numbered years.

Discussion Leader: Facilitates the free exchange of information and ideas; summarizes points of agreement and disagreement.

Facilitator: Helps individuals and groups reach common ground.

Moderator: Presides at candidate forums and other meetings with a debate or panel format.

Position: The League's point of view about an issue which forms the basis for League action. It is reached through study and either consensus or concurrence.

Program: The collection of governmental issues that League members have chosen for concerted study and action.

Resource Person: Member of program committee supplying facts for discussion.

Study Item: That area of League program that is being studied by the membership.

VOTEline/Voter Assistance Hotline: Toll-free hotline for voting information – (800)-792-VOTE

Voters Guide: LWV publication of candidate responses to questions, as well as voting information.