



Membership Handbook

League of Women Voters of New Jersey

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 that parallel our government. Most members join through a nearby local League and participate in all three levels. 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). If you don't happen to have a local League near enough to join, you are a member-at-large and can participate at the state and national levels. Many members at large also work in their local community.

Anyone (16 and older), citizen or non-citizen, who supports the mission of the League is welcome to become a voting member of the League, and we strive to represent the entire community.

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 may participate in as many activities as you have time and interest for. They include (but are not limited to) voter registration, Get Out the Vote efforts, moderating a candidates' forum, observing meetings of government bodies, sitting on a statewide public policy committee, taking action on public policy, interviewing elected officials, and researching and/or presenting information about an issue being studied 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.

League Goals and Values:

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and

influences public policy through education and advocacy. We envision a democracy where every person has the desire, the right, the knowledge and the confidence to participate.

The goal of the League of Women Voters is to empower voters and defend democracy.

We:

- Build informed and engaged 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

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. The 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 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*.

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

It is important for every member to be careful lest their posts or statements give the impression that the League supports a candidate

(for example by mentioning your personal support in the same Facebook post that notes your League membership). It is also important that members not speak or appear to speak in the name of the League unless authorized to do so. For example, when we visit a local government body wearing League buttons, we do not comment pro or con on the proposals submitted there, even after taking off the button unless we had been authorized by the board to do so. You are representing the League and will be perceived as such.

By "grassroots" we mean that each and every member of the League participates in making the policy decisions of the League. From local League annual meetings to state conventions to 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 typically 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 or other policies. 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 an 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 the national and state League. Members work on local issues in the community or county through the local League, act on problems of state government through the state League, and work on national governmental issues through the national League.

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 offer members the opportunity to work on an aspect of League activity, such as producing the local bulletin, providing voters service or studying an issue (program item). Members can also work on statewide "issue" committees, like government, education or women's issues, or on "process" committees like budget and nominations.

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 residents at least 16 years of age. *Nonvoting members* are associate members—those under 16.

Who joins the LWV?

Your neighbor, your friend, your husband, your wife, those who share your political affiliation, those who do not—anyone who supports the mission of the League. 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 usually a local League.

The League offers you unlimited opportunities to 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 *activist/voter/community member!*

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 take action as a League member when you receive action alerts.*
- 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., wearing a League button to let our leaders know that the League is watching and cares about what they do.
- Make contributions over and above your dues if you can.

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 places 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. Vote411.org (named for the old dial-411 method of getting telephone information) is a growing League initiative to provide information about state, county, and wherever possible, local candidates to residents throughout the nation. The League of Women Voters of New Jersey and many

local Leagues are actively working to enter this information into the website.

Working with and lobbying legislators:

The League does not forget elected officials after Election Day. Following specific League processes, we form relationships with representatives in the state legislature and U.S. Congress to advocate for policies we support and learn about their priorities. We run action campaigns on League issues in which members write, call, and meet their legislators to press them on matters of concern to us. If you are interested in doing this kind of work, you will work closely with the League of Women Voters of New Jersey (state level) to coordinate all actions.

Assisting new voters:

We give special attention to newly naturalized citizens and to 17-year-olds in order to provide them with information on registration and voting procedures. (In New Jersey you can register to vote at 17 -- then vote in the first election after you turn 18).

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 voter 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, one of the best means of promoting good representative

government. The only limitations on such activity are those described under “Nonpartisanship”, which limit the activities of League leaders in certain positions to be active in partisan ways. 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 (in coordination with the appropriate level of League) 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 state program is determined, we can demonstrate the principle behind choosing all levels of League program:

- 5-6 months before the biennial convention, a list of current positions, materials for discussing them, and (sometimes) recommendations from the state board, are sent to all local Leagues. Local Leagues then schedule program-planning meetings. At those meetings, members vote their preferences, and the local board sends the results to the state committee organizing the process. Most of the recommendations are simply to retain current positions (occasionally to drop one as not needed). Sometimes there are recommendations for studying a new position. The state program committee reviews all the recommendations to determine which have strong support. Those that do, and which meet other criteria, will, after board review, be part of the state board's recommended program. Other items that are mentioned (such as a study of a new topic with limited interest) will be "not recommended" items.
- 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. Both recommended and not recommended items can be approved at convention, but the latter must meet more stringent standards.
- *National and local program* are determined in a similar 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?

If Convention delegates approve a study of a topic (or an update to an existing position), the study and consensus process is put into place.

A state level (or national level, as appropriate) committee will form, to do background research and develop possible positions or questions for League members.

Local Leagues will gather in meetings to learn about the issue and eventually to provide feedback to the higher level of League on their opinions. *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. Often there is some negotiation involved, with "consensus" being something like, "Many of us agree on this statement, but we would all be happier if it included X, so our consensus is to agree but strongly recommend adding that extra component."

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.

For a state study, there are opportunities for members to join the state level committee researching the issue. Members at Large can participate by joining a state committee or attending a local League consensus meeting near them. Sometimes the final consensus is done by mail, in which every member regardless of location can participate.

Instead of a new study, another way to reach member agreement is *concurrence*—agreeing with (or concurring with) a position previously arrived at. For positions and program, this generally means that delegates at convention or a local League annual meeting agree to "concur" with a study done at a similar League level by another

League. Why re-study something another League has already devoted attention to, if it is relevant to your League?

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. Leagues also do not take action without coordination with and approval from the appropriate level of the organization. For example, a local League cannot take state action or meet with a state legislator without coordinating with the League of Women Voters of New Jersey. Similarly, the League of Women Voters of the United States must be consulted prior to taking action at the federal level. This process ensures we are being impactful and speaking with one voice.

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 <i>Leagues</i> , 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.
LLs	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.
PMP	Per Member Payment – a portion of each member's dues which supports their state and national membership. The 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 (attendance at a meeting, phone calls or letters) is needed on an issue or legislation.

Citizen's Guide to New Jersey Government: An annual LWVNJ 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.

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

VOTEline: Citizens' 800 line for voting information – (800)-792-VOTE

Voters Guide: A state or local LWV (online) publication of candidate responses to questions, as well as voting information.