

Members Handbook



**League of Women Voters
of Massachusetts**

Welcome to the League of Women Voters

Dear Member,

Welcome to the League of Women Voters. You have joined a group of women and men of all ages and backgrounds with the common interest of “Making Democracy Work.” As a member of the League of Women Voters, you will follow in the footsteps of a long line of leaders committed to building better communities and a stronger democracy.

Since 1920, the League’s mission has been to secure democracy’s promise through voter education, issue advocacy, and citizen outreach. Our goal remains to help create a participatory democracy for the 21st century – a democracy where the citizens are actively engaged in shaping governmental policies that affect their lives and where the government solicits and values citizen involvement. We believe a healthy democracy is a democracy where citizens are involved in their communities, at the ballot box, in public policy debates and in government deliberations.

The League gives you the opportunity to learn more about your community, to take a continuing and intensive course in government at all levels and to develop leadership skills.

You can tailor your involvement and participation in the League to fit your interests and schedule. Even if you don’t have the time for active participation, your membership alone strengthens our voice.

This booklet is designed to help you make the most of your membership.

This is your League. Welcome!

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Principles

The League of Women Voters believes...

. . . in representative government and in the individual liberties established in the Constitution of the United States.

. . . that democratic government depends upon informed and active participation of 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.

. . . 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.

. . . 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.

. . . 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 that affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy and adopt domestic policies that facilitate the solution of international problems.

...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.

WHO WE ARE

Mission

The League of Women Voters, 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.

What League Nonpartisanship Means

The League never supports or opposes any political party or candidate for elective office. However, the League encourages its members, as individuals, to take part fully in the electoral process.

The Work of the League

The substantive work of the League divides itself into two general categories:

- Voter Service and Citizen Education
- Program and Action

In our Voter Service and Citizen Education roles, the League provides scrupulously neutral information on candidates and the electoral process. In Program and Action, the League lobbies for changes in law and governmental policy based on study and consensus of the membership.



Voters Service and Citizen Education

Voter Service and Citizen Education are often the first things the public thinks of when they hear “the League of Women Voters.”

Voter Service

League members have long been helping citizens to register to vote in workplaces, schools and other locations. Both the “Motor Voter” law and the Help America Vote Act, federal laws that the League successfully supported, have made it easier for citizens to enroll with mail-in registration forms. In addition, local Leagues encourage voter turnout by providing reminders to vote, information on how to vote absentee, and often, rides to the polls.

Local and state Leagues often provide voter guides or questionnaires on the candidates and information about the candidates and ballot issues. These may be printed in statewide and local newspapers or posted on local League websites. For many contested elections, local Leagues organize candidates nights or debates. The League’s newest voter education tool www.votinginfo.info offers comprehensive, Massachusetts-specific voting and election information in a user-friendly format.

Citizen Education

Because it is non-partisan, the League is known as a trusted source of fair and impartial information on many issues. Often at the beginning of a new study or to call attention to a timely issue that the League has not previously studied, local and state Leagues present public forums featuring differing viewpoints.

The League publishes information and offers training on how to lobby public officials at all levels of government, run for office, moderate a forum, and implement and monitor the open meeting law. Catalogues of publications about training opportunities are available from local Leagues and from the offices and websites of the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts (LWVMA) and the national League (LWVUS).

Program and Action

“Program” refers to specific policies and position statements on which the League can take action. At each level - local, state and national – program must be consistent with the League’s Principles (see page 1) which illustrate the breadth and variety of League concerns about structure of government, social policy, fiscal policy, natural resources and international relations. Specifics of the state League (LWVMA) program are available in “Where We Stand” on the League’s website, www.lwvma.org. The national (LWVUS) program, “Impact on Issues,” is online at www.lwv.org.

Program Planning

The League is unique in its grassroots approach to planning and adopting program where issues to be studied are proposed and decided on from the grassroots up.

At program planning meetings, members consider what parts of the existing local, national or state program need special attention and what new issues, if any, should be studied. Recommendations for issues to be restudied and new program are forwarded by the board of each local League to the appropriate level. A local League’s annual meeting and the state and national conventions use these recommendations to help decide what parts of the existing program need special emphasis and whether to begin a new study.

The program concerns of local Leagues vary. Some Leagues do little in the way of local study and action, while others have an extensive catalogue of positions, often concerned with local development, public schools and community services.

Study and Adoption of Program

When League members at an annual meeting or convention decide on a study or re-study, local and state boards appoint a chair of a “resource” or study committee. Taking part in a study is an excellent way for new members to become familiar and involved with the League.

The resource committee is responsible for developing reliable and balanced information to be presented at a discussion

meeting called a “unit”. Often “consensus” questions are used to focus discussion and encourage the attending members to come to agreement. The responses to these questions are compiled by either the local, state, or national League and, if there is substantial agreement, a new or modified position is added to the program at that level.

“Concurrence” is another method sometimes used to adopt a new position. In this process, members of a local League or delegates to a convention are asked to concur with a position statement. They are provided with the same kind of thorough and unbiased information as when using the consensus process. But instead of responding to consensus questions, the membership or delegates are asked to agree with a position statement that has already been formulated. Often these are positions arrived at through study and consensus by another League.

The LWVUS convention, for example, adopted the national positions on handgun control and reproductive rights by concurring with positions derived from two of LWVMA’s consensus positions.

Once positions are adopted and are part of the League program, they are re-endorsed regularly. Local positions are voted on at annual meeting; state and national positions are voted at the respective convention. National positions apply at all levels; state positions may be used at both state and local levels; and action on local positions is confined to local communities.

Action

The whole purpose of program development is to be able to take action on issues of concern. Although League issues are governmental, action need not be confined to lobbying elected officials. Action can be a public relations effort to persuade citizens to recycle, for example, or to conserve water. Here are some of the ways the League may take action:

- Lobbying for changes in a law, letter writing, e-mail and telephone campaigns to legislators or other policy makers, drafting new laws and local ordinances
- Testifying at hearings

- Publishing and distributing persuasive and pertinent materials
- Participating in public forums or local cable TV programs
- Organizing letters-to-the-editor campaigns
- Working in coalition with other organizations
- Campaigning on ballot questions
- Litigating constitutional concerns
- Monitoring and observing governmental bodies

Since there is always more to do than can ever be done, it is extremely important to prioritize and to strategize. At each level of the League, members and delegates to conventions, as part of the program planning process, decide where to focus the League's energy, time and resources. It is the responsibility of the board of directors to determine how these priorities will be carried out. At the same time, the leadership depends on members to help implement these decisions.



Organization

The League exists on three levels: national, state and local. A member of a local League automatically becomes a member of the state and national Leagues. *When a League is comprised of more than one town, it is called an area League but is still considered a local League.* Members living outside the area of and not enrolled in a local League are called members-at-large (MALs). These members, whether they join at the state or national level, are automatically members of both their state League and of the national League.

Annual Meeting

Local Leagues hold an annual meeting each year, usually in late spring, where the members adopt the local League's program, approve the budget and any bylaw changes, and elect officers and directors. All members are encouraged to attend and are sent the agenda in advance. The meeting is an opportunity to catch up with old friends and get to know new members.

Convention and Council

The LWWUS convention is held biennially in even-numbered years, and the LWWMA convention is held in odd years. Delegates appointed by local Leagues in numbers proportionate to their membership, and observers attend. Any member is eligible to serve as a delegate when approved as a delegate by their local League board. At LWWMA's conventions, members-at-large can also be delegates. Delegates debate and vote on program, budget, and bylaw changes and elect officers.

Council, a much smaller and shorter meeting, takes place on alternate years at both LWWUS and LWWMA to adopt a budget and give direction to the national or state board.

Board of Directors

Each of the three levels of the League is governed by a board of directors, which includes the officers and directors who are elected or appointed.

Local and state boards usually meet once a month to decide priorities, activities and action.

A Nominating Committee submits a slate to the annual meeting or convention. Nominations can also be made from the floor of the annual meeting or convention with the consent of the nominee, and some directors are appointed.

Serving on a local League board puts you in immediate touch with the issues of your city or town. Local and state levels of the League also appoint volunteers as specialists in particular program areas. As an example, a local education specialist acts for the League on local public school matters.

Local and state board meetings are open to all members.

Finance

As a nonprofit organization the League relies on the dues and contributions of its members and supporters. Local membership dues include per member payments (PMPs) to both the state and national Leagues. The amount of dues is determined locally by a vote at annual meeting.

Dues alone are not sufficient to support the work of the League at any level. Leagues, at all levels, raise a substantial portion of their funds through grants, contributions, bequests, advertising and fundraising events.

The LWV Education Fund at the national level and the Citizen Education Fund, also known as the Lotte E. Scharfman Memorial Fund of LWVM, are 501(c)(3) organizations and accept tax-deductible contributions to support the voters service and citizen education activities of the League.

Membership

Membership in the League of Women Voters is open to everyone. Joining at any level automatically confers membership at every level: local, state and national.

League members who are U.S. citizens and at least 18 years old are voting members. Members under 18 or non-citizens are considered Associate i.e. nonvoting members of the League.

Members-at-large (MALs) are League members who live outside the area of a local League or choose not to enroll in any local League.

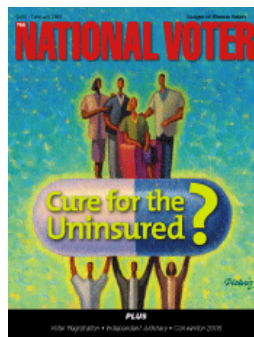
When two or more people live at the same address they can become household members. The second member pays reduced dues.

Honorary life members have belonged to the League for 50 years or more and do not pay dues.

There are membership funds for those who find the dues a hardship, and there is a special student rate.

Dues are determined in each local League by a vote at annual meeting. Dues and date of renewal vary League to League.

The League values all members. You do not have to be an active member to support the League and receive publications.



Benefits and Opportunities of Membership

Publications

Local Leagues send members a news bulletin, usually monthly and sometimes electronically. Every member receives a subscription to *The Massachusetts Voter*, the newsletter of LWVMA, and the *National Voter*, published by the League of Women Voters of the United States, along with invitations to meetings, Action Alerts and other information about League events and concerns, often via e-mail. The LWVMA (www.lwvma.org) and LWVUS (www.lwv.org) websites also offer valuable information for League members. Many local Leagues have their own websites. Links are available on www.lwvma.org and lwv.org.



Meetings and Forums

Local League meetings, often organized as forums on particular issues, provide an excellent way to learn how your community works. Topics range from those of local interest, such as an in-depth review of the warrant for an upcoming town meeting, to those with broader implications, such as the USA Patriot Act. Local board meetings are always open to all members, and members are encouraged to attend annual membership meetings.

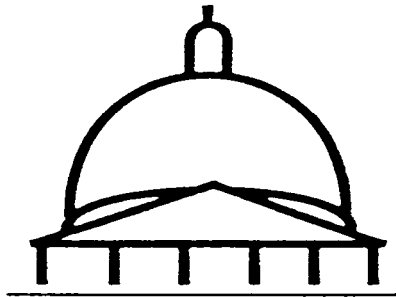
At the state level there are at least two important membership meetings each year in addition to a bi-annual Fall Conference: Day on the Hill, a lobby day at the State House held in late winter or early spring, gives members the opportunity to learn about LWVMA's legislative priorities, to talk with their legislators, and to hear from important State House policymakers. The spring Convention or Council are described on page 9.

The Fall Conference features a morning session dedicated to a single issue of particular concern to the League and afternoon workshops on other timely topics. Recent conferences have covered issues as diverse as health care reform, free air time to candidates and municipal fiscal policy.

Opportunities to Learn and to Participate

Local Leagues need members to observe and report on meetings of important governmental bodies. Members study new issues and update past studies. At election time, Leagues need help registering voters, organizing debates, preparing voter information, and/or campaigning on ballot questions.

Leagues also need help with the activities that go into running a well-managed grassroots organization, such as budgeting, fundraising, researching, planning meetings, writing for publication and record-keeping. Professional skills are needed and welcomed. Organizational work also offers the opportunity for members to learn new skills. Many members have built on the skills and knowledge they've gained as League leaders to run for public office and to serve their community and the state in a wide variety of constructive and influential ways.



A Brief History of the League

The League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 at the last convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, six months prior to the passage of the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote.

The League began as a “mighty political experiment” designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. From the beginning, the League has been an activist, grassroots organization that believes that citizens should play a critical role in shaping public policy. It was then, and is now, a nonpartisan organization, neither supporting nor opposing candidates or political parties at any level of government. Its basic purpose is “to make democracy work for all citizens” via voter education, and to influence policy through advocacy.

Also founded in 1920, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts (LWVMA) is widespread and active, composed of over 50 local Leagues. LWVMA and its members have worked effectively on educating the public about candidates and elections and advocating for numerous important constitutional and legislative changes including the equal right of women to serve on juries. In the 1960s, LWVMA led the effort to cut the size of the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

In 2003, LWVMA launched www.votinginfo.info, a Massachusetts-specific website for comprehensive, nonpartisan voting information for those who look to the Internet for accurate and up-to-date information.

LWVMA developed the first Massachusetts Voters’ Bill of Rights which, signed by the Governor and the Secretary of the Commonwealth and endorsed by the Legislature, was posted in every polling place in Massachusetts for the first time in the November 2004 election. Recent activities include opposition to casino gambling, and the Vote 2008 campaign to reach out to underrepresented constituencies and studies on Affordable Housing and Municipal Finance.

League Language

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

Candidate's night: A meeting or forum that gives voters the opportunity to hear, question and compare candidates, sometimes in a debate format.

Citizen education/voter service: Year-round League activities to help citizens be politically effective and to encourage their participation in the political process. Basic voter service activities include registering voters and presenting factual, nonpartisan information on candidates and election issues. Citizen education activities include studying critical public policy issues and providing unbiased information about these issues to the community in a variety of formats and through the media.

Concurrence: The process by which a local League or a League convention comes to substantial agreement with a position on an issue reached by another League or a small group of members.

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

Education project: An educational review of a program concern in order to bring League members up to date.

Lotte E. Scharfman Memorial Fund: A charitable organization that is the education and voters service wing of LWVMA, named in memory of former President Lotte E. Scharfman. It solicits and receives tax-deductible contributions. It is also known as the LWVMA Citizen Education Fund.

Observers: League members who attend and monitor meetings of governmental bodies.

PMP: Acronym for per member payment, the amount of money paid to LWVUS and the state League on behalf of each member. The PMP amount is decided by delegates at state and national conventions.

Portfolio: The specific responsibility of a board member or an off-board specialist.

Position: A carefully worded statement approved by the board at the appropriate level after member consensus or concurrence on an issue. These statements become part of the League's program and are used as a basis for League action. Local Leagues review and vote on their positions at every annual meeting. National and state positions are reviewed and voted at the respective biennial conventions.

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

Recorder: A person who takes notes of a discussion and makes a record of agreements and disagreements and subsequent refinements during the discussion.

Resource committee: The working committee on a League study that carries out research on all sides of an issue and presents information to members. "Resource" also refers to the individual members of the committee in their role as unbiased suppliers of information.

Unit: (1) A subdivision of a League that has a large number of members or covers a large area; or (2) a small discussion meeting for League members to get information from a resource committee and consider possible new or revised consensus positions.

Voters Guide: A nonpartisan publication giving candidates' qualifications and positions on selected issues.

Voter service: See citizen education/voter service, above.



Where to Find More Information

Both the LWVMA and LWVUS websites are excellent resources for learning more about the League.

The LWVMA website – www.lwvma.org – has up to date information on issues the Massachusetts League is studying, opportunities for advocacy, important League events and projects, and contact information for local Leagues in Massachusetts.

The award-winning Massachusetts website www.votinginfo.info answers questions about absentee voting and voter registration, polling places and much more.

The LWVUS site – www.lwv.org – has information on national issues, bills and votes in Congress as well as contact information for resources and agencies in Washington.

Remember, if you have *any* questions about the League or your membership; contact the leaders of your local League. You can also contact LWVMA or LWVUS directly:

League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

133 Portland Street, Boston, MA 02114

617-523-2999

Fax: 617-248-0881

Email: lwvma@lwvma.org

Voter Information Phone: 617-723-1421 or 800-882-1649

League of Women Voters of the United States

1730 M Street, Washington, DC 21136

202-429-1965

Fax: 202-429-0854

Email: membership@lwv.org

We look forward to hearing from you!

Diversity Policy

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts is committed to reflect in its principles and practices the diversity and pluralism in our state.

In both its principles and practices, the League of Women Voters will promote inclusion in leadership, staffing, membership, and participation in any League activity. There shall be no barrier based on race, ethnicity, national origin, creed, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, attribute, or age.

The League acknowledges that pluralism and diverse perspectives are fundamental to the values the League upholds and are necessary for responsible and representative decision-making.

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