

## **What is nonpartisanship?**

The League of Women Voters is nonpartisan and political. Every League at each level should have a policy that works for its League while following the general guidelines of nonpartisanship. An activity that may be allowed by a local League may be forbidden at the state level. The purpose of the policy is NOT to stop League board members from participating in the political policy. If that were the case, we could never recruit board members because they tend to be so active in community issues! The purpose is to assure that the League's reputation as a nonpartisan organization that the public can trust to provide good information about candidates remains intact.

Each year, the board of every League should review its nonpartisan policy to make sure that it is still working for that League. The policy should not be so specific that there is no "wobble room" or opportunity for discussion by the League board. The policy is not meant to cover every situation. Rather, the final decision about a situation falls upon the board. Some decisions will be easy; others will require prolonged discussion. In both situations, board members should have a good understanding of the purpose of the policy and its restrictions.

This document includes three items:

**The League and Nonpartisanship** by Susan Gilbert, a 40-year League member

**Non-partisan Policy** —Developing and Implementing a Nonpartisan Policy  
(From LWVUS League Basics (In League) League Basics Resources)

The LWVRI's non-partisan policy.

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This article was originally published online by the LWVUS. Later the LWVRI reprinted it in the state *Voter*. It's a good place to begin when trying to understand nonpartisanship *vis a vis* the League.

### **The League and Nonpartisanship**

by Susan Gilbert, Newsletter Editor and 40-year League member

It is not uncommon for outsiders, and even some members, to question how the League can be nonpartisan yet advocate on positions that, in the slice of time that is now, appear to be partisan. In the highly partisan climate that has developed in recent years, the League is one of the very few political organizations that is not in either the liberal/Democratic camp or the conservative/Republican camp. And we have members of all political persuasions and encourage them to get involved in politics. So members may be partisan, but the organization is not. All this is hard for many to wrap their minds around.

The League is nonpartisan in that we do not endorse or support any political party or candidate for office. We don't rate legislators, we don't track their votes and we don't threaten them if they don't vote our way. Voter service is one of our main missions and we publish nonpartisan voter guides and hold candidate forums to help voters educate themselves beyond TV ads.

Education is an important League function, and we try in our meetings and in this newsletter to inform our attendees/readers and stimulate them to think about issues in our world. However, the League is also an advocacy group, and we have positions on issues that have been developed over the years since our founding in 1920 and are the result of study and consensus of the local Leagues nationwide. These positions are updated from time to time, but are basically consistent. The positions and platforms of the political parties, on the other hand, do change and at times they resemble our League position, or not. But the League doesn't change or drop its positions because they are currently those of one party or the other. And we do speak out!

An example is health care. The League has a position on comprehensive health care for all Americans. President Truman liked that idea too, and President Eisenhower delivered a special message to Congress on January 31, 1955, recommending a comprehensive health program for Americans. (Read it <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=10399>.) Lyndon Johnson got Medicare passed and that took the pressure off for awhile. But President Nixon encouraged HMOs as a way to rein in costs and provide health care for more people. Then President Reagan came along and decided the free market was the best way to manage health care, and the Republicans have basically supported this idea since. But clearly both parties have been on both sides of the issue.

The key is not to confuse politics with position advocacy.

## **Non-partisan Policy —Developing and Implementing a Nonpartisan Policy**

From LWVUS League Basics (In League) League Basics Resources

The choice made in 1920 to neither support nor oppose any political party or candidate for public office continues today to ensure that the League's voice is heard above the tumult of party politics. The nonpartisan policy has added strength to the League's positions on issues and has made possible wide acceptance of League voter service and other educational activities.

At the same time, the League is a political organization and encourages members to participate fully in the political party of their choice. It is an advantage to the League to have politically active members and, equally important, it can be a personally satisfying experience.

Each League's board of directors is responsible for drafting and carrying out a nonpartisan policy in its community. In order to ensure the credibility of the League as a nonpartisan organization, the board also is responsible for seeing that both its members and the public understand the League's nonpartisan policy.

### Formulating a Nonpartisan Policy

Each League board should formulate a policy that best reflects existing conditions in its League, as well as the political climate and traditions in its community. The policy should include specific guidelines to govern the political activities of its board and off-board members.

The following are some basic elements that should be included in your League's nonpartisan policy:

- \* A statement of the nonpartisan nature of the organization,
- \* Guidelines on permissible activities for board members,
- \* Restrictions on certain board positions (e.g., president and voters service chair),
- \* A policy on how to handle resignations when a board member resigns to engage in political activity.

Key points to consider in this process include the following:

- \* The sensitivity or visibility of specific board assignments or functions,
  - \* The extent to which the public identifies a board or off-board member's activities with those of the League,
  - \* The sensitivity or visibility of specific board assignments or functions,
  - \* An overall assessment of the League's credibility as an effective nonpartisan political organization in the community,
  - \* The visibility associated with a specific political activity (such as participating in partisan social affairs, signing petitions, making campaign contributions, or serving as a campaign manager).

Since times and conditions change, it is essential that the board discuss its nonpartisan political policy annually and update it as necessary. The ideal time to review your League's policy is at the orientation meeting for your new board, when you clarify the policy-making role of the board as a whole, as well as individual responsibilities. It is particularly important to review the nonpartisan policy before specific cases come up. Even if no changes are necessary, the review is important, both to educate board members and to anticipate situations that might cause difficulty later.

Party Affiliation. Board members usually have party affiliations and should certainly carry out the responsibilities of every voter in exercising the franchise, including the responsibility to become informed about candidates.

Elective (Public) Office. While board members generally may not run for elective office, the definition of what constitutes an elective office varies in our grassroots organization. For example, some New England town meetings consist of elected representatives, and League board members sometimes run for these offices. Members of charter commissions and delegates to state constitutional conventions are often elected, yet many Leagues allow board members to run in these elections. It is extremely difficult to make a blanket statement to cover all situations, especially since running for office is a natural outgrowth of League training. Each League, therefore, will have to decide on its policy and judge each situation as it occurs.

If a board member declares for an elective office other than one determined permissible by the League, the board decides when the member should resign from the board. The wording of the public notice of the resignation should, if possible, include the name of the person succeeding to the board position and should avoid the appearance of endorsing the resigning board member's candidacy. Resigning from the board does not mean resigning from the League, nor does it mean that the board member cannot serve on the board later on; the board decides when that is appropriate. Another possible option is for the person to take an off-board position if there is a specific project or activity that still needs their contribution.

Public Commissions and Committee. The League sometimes takes the initiative in recommending people to serve on appointed public commissions and committees. Board members are often asked to serve on such committees, either as individuals or as representatives of the League. Such service enables League leaders to further League program goals. However, even if a League member represents the League on a commission, the board is not bound to support that commission's recommendations. If the recommendations differ from or cover more points than the League's position, the board should clarify the League stance and what it does and does not endorse in the commission's report.

Controversy. The League's nonpartisan stance does not mean that the League should not get involved in controversy. Someone may accuse the League of violating its nonpartisan policy because of what is viewed as a partisan position on a controversial political topic. Or a candidate may refuse to participate in a candidate forum or to provide information for a voter guide. A League will be a strong and effective political force to the degree that it can deal with and accept controversy, live with uncertainty, and avoid using its nonpartisan policy as a shield for not getting involved. Good planning, accurate information and remaining polite but firm will go a long way toward defusing such situations.

Coalitions. Joining a coalition is an effective use of resources to work on an issue, yet Leagues are sometimes concerned that coalitions to which they belong may eventually endorse candidates. This need not always keep the League out of a coalition it might otherwise join, but it is important to think through the ramifications for the League's policy of not supporting or opposing candidates for political office. If a coalition that the League belongs to or is considering joining will concentrate its activities on supporting or opposing candidates, then the League should not participate.

# Non Partisan Policy of the League of Women Voters of Rhode Island

adopted February 8th, 2010

The League of Women Voters of Rhode Island is a nonpartisan organization that does not support or oppose candidates for public office but does encourage its members, as individuals, to participate actively in the political process. The League also acts on issues, but only those that the membership chooses for study and action. The League's nonpartisanship is one of its greatest assets.

League board members, indeed all League members, are encouraged to vote in elections, join political parties, attend candidates forums, serve as poll workers, write their legislators in support of or in opposition to issues, and attend seminars on issues.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Directors of the LWVRI to assure that its non-partisanship remains intact, and as such restricts the activities of its Board members.

Specifically, LWVRI board members may not:

- Run for state or federal political office;
- Hold an office in a political party;
- Work in a public way in support of a candidate;
- Make a public political endorsement;
- Accept employment that is partisan; and
- Contribute to or campaign for an issue that is opposition to a current LWV position.

In addition, board members who serve as the public face of the League—the president, voter service director, the advocacy director and on occasion, board members who head study committees or hold active issue portfolios— may not carry out certain activities.

Specifically: the President, Voter Service Director, the Advocacy Director, and the chairs of active issue campaigns may not run for any local, state, or federal political office; the President, Voter Service Director, and the Advocacy Director may not accept a position in the campaign of a candidate for office; the President and Voter Service director may not circulate petitions for candidates, contribute to the campaigns for candidates for office for local or state offices (including candidates for U.S. Congress), or to campaigns for issues that will be on the ballot, or work behind the scenes for or fundraise for a candidate for a political office on the local, state or federal level.

All board members, including the President,

Voters' Service chair, and Advocacy Director) may contribute to the campaigns of presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

The Advocacy Chair, and in some instances the chair of an active issue campaign, should consult with the board before contributing to an issue campaign. The President and the Voter Service Chair should consult with the board before his or her spouse files a petition to run for office. The President, the Advocacy Chair, and Issue Chairs should consult with the board before campaigning for an issue that is not related to a League position and before agreeing to hold a position on the board of another lobbying organization.

All other board members who are not mentioned in the exceptions described above may: circulate petitions for a candidate; attend a fundraiser for a candidate; make contributions to political campaigns at the local, state, and federal level; participate in get-out-the-vote activities; circulate petitions for and support issue campaigns not sponsored by the League; hold positions on boards of other lobbying organizations; hold appointed local, state or federal government positions; and continue to serve on the LWVRI board while a spouse runs for or holds a political office.

Members of the LWVRI's board, however, must also recognize that they have a special responsibility to assure that their public activities in support of candidates for office or issues do not create a partisan impression or compromise the nonpartisan policy of an individual board member's local League. Because of these concerns, Board members should confer with the entire LWVRI Board before:

- Filing to run for local political office
- Accepting a position in the campaign of, agreeing to work behind the scenes for, or fundraising for a candidate for a political office on the local, state or federal level
- Testifying on an issue for another organization.

Approved by the Board of Directors of the LWVRI, February 8th, 2010

Reviewed and accepted by the

Board of Directors, October 11, 2017