

# League of Women Voters 101: League Basics

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## MISSION STATEMENTS

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.

Membership in the League is open to people of all ages. The League is nonpartisan as it neither supports nor opposes any candidate for office, nor any political party.

At the national level, League activities are coordinated and staffed by two distinct but complementary organizations.

- **The League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS)** is a 501(c)(4) advocacy and membership organization. LWVUS works with its state and local affiliates to increase understanding of public policy issues and to influence particular policies through education and advocacy.
- **The League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF)** is a 501(c)(3) citizen education organization that helps people, in the United States and abroad, thoughtfully engage in the democratic process. This includes, but is not limited to, providing information about elections and the voting process.

The League of Women Voters of Portland's structure parallels LWVUS. Its members have the same goals and methods.

Bylaws and Policies and Procedures may be found within League Documents at <https://lwvpdx.org/about/league-documents/>

## HISTORY

**The League of Women Voters of the United States** was founded in 1920 emerging from the National American Women Suffrage Association. The League is rooted in the movement that secured women's right to vote, and men have been members since 1974. For 99 years LWV has been at work to improve our government and engage all citizens in the decisions that impact their lives. LWV operates at national, state, and local levels through more than 700 state and local Leagues, in all 50 states. The League is one of America's most trusted grassroots organizations.

**The League of Women Voters of Portland** was organized in 1926 with 40 active and 12 sustaining members. Current membership as of September 2023 is over 300.

## NONPARTISAN

The League is proud to be nonpartisan, neither supporting nor opposing candidates or political parties at any level of government, but always working on vital issues of concern to members and the public.

**Issues.** After detailed research, study, and consensus/agreement, League members may adopt "positions" on issues. Using these positions, the League may advocate to influence public policy.

As individuals, League members are encouraged to engage fully in the political process.

## MEMBERSHIP

Membership in LWV is open to all persons who are at least 16 years of age. Others (such as a person under sixteen) may join as non-voting associate members. Members work to improve our government and engage people in the decisions that impact their lives. LWV of Portland is an organization of members who are interested in their community and their government.

## LEAGUE 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 of the United States believes that all powers of the U.S. government should be exercised within the constitutional framework of a balance among the three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial.
- The League of Women Voters believes that democratic government depends upon informed and active participation in government 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.

- 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 that 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 efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibility, adequate financing, and coordination among the different agencies and levels of government.
- 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 that affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy and adopt domestic policies that 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 development of international organization and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

## **LEAGUE ORGANIZATION**

The League operates on three levels. Each member of the LWV of Portland may participate in the League at any of these three levels:

*Local:* LWV of Portland (LWVPDX ): [lwvpx.org](http://lwvpx.org)

*State:* LWV of Oregon (LWVOR ): [lwvor.org](http://lwvor.org)

*National:* LWV of the United States (LWVUS ): [lwv.org](http://lwv.org)

The Portland League’s Board of Directors sets policy and is responsible for business matters. Meetings are open to members; dates and location are shown in the monthly calendar in the Portland League’s newsletter, *The Voter*.

Committee chairs generally serve on the board and carry out the League’s mission with member and non-member volunteers. Any League member may serve on any committee. There are administrative committees such as Membership, Development, and Budget. The major community outreach committees are Action, Community Education, and Voter Service.

## **LEAGUE COMMUNITY OUTREACH (Action, Civic Engagement, and Voter Service)**

### **Action**

The LWV of Portland’s Action Committee consists of members interested in learning more about local public policy issues and exploring ways in which the League can influence government decisions based on our advocacy positions. Action Committee meetings are open to all members and dates are published in the monthly calendar of Portland’s newsletter, *The Voter*. Reports on Action Committee meetings are in *The Voter* and online at: <https://lwvpx.org/action-committee/>

Portland has adopted positions in the following areas: City of Portland, Multnomah County, Education, Social Policy and Regional Issues.

The Portland League’s positions are online at <https://lwvpdx.org/advocate/league-positions>. Those, plus positions held by LWVOR and LWVUS, are on the same online site. You can also click on “League Positions” from the pulldown menu under “ADVOCATE” at the top of the [lwvpdx.org](https://lwvpdx.org) homepage.

Members are encouraged to become LWV of Portland “observers” who attend public meetings and report back—an important way to follow closely and help shape League strategy in a specific area.

## **Civic Engagement: Community and Member Education**

The League is dedicated to using education and engagement as a means to encourage informed, active citizen involvement in government. We design educational and engagement events for our own members and for the general public. These include:

- **Public Outreach**. Our public outreach includes monthly Community Education meetings, September through April. These meetings are open to the public and feature speakers with expertise and experience with current public policy issues. Speakers discuss issues of importance to Portland, and answer questions from the audience. These meetings are meant to provide reliable information about governmental processes and issues to the public, and they are recorded for streaming on the LWV website and for rebroadcast on public access television.
- **Member Discussion Groups (Units)**. Portland League members participate in small discussion groups (units), which focus on discussion of public policy issues, issues adopted for study by the League, and evaluating existing positions to determine if they need to be updated or reviewed. Most units meet monthly from September through April. League members may attend any unit meeting. Information about unit meetings can be found in each *Voter* newsletter and on the LWV of Portland website: <https://lwvpdx.org/join-us/join-a-unit/>.
- **Study Committees**. Study committees are formed to research and analyze issues. New studies are approved at the national or state conventions or local annual membership meeting. Lists or copies of existing studies are also available from the national, state, and local Leagues. Study committees meet frequently, generally over the course of two years to share research findings, interview experts, write a report and create a consensus.

**LWV of Portland**. Recently, the LWV of Portland updated an earlier study about Portland’s City Government and conducted a new study on the *Portland Police Bureau: Oversight and Accountability*. League members use the reports and guidance questions from a Study Committee to discuss the issue in Discussion Unit meetings; they create a “consensus” for recommendations for a new League advocacy position. A Civic Engagement sub-committee compiles these recommendations to develop local League positions, which must be accepted and approved by the LWV Board before they can be used for advocacy. Local positions are reviewed annually by the members, who then vote on whether to retain, restudy or drop these positions.

For LWVOR studies, members’ recommendations are compiled by a state-level committee and lead to state LWVOR positions. Members of the LWV of Portland and of other local Oregon Leagues may participate in the state League studies. They also participate in reviewing the positions every other year before the biennial LWVOR Convention.

Members’ recommendations on LWVUS studies are compiled at the national level, and lead to national LWVUS positions.

Positions derived from studies at any League level are regularly reviewed and voted upon by that level’s membership at its annual meeting or convention. These positions may be used for advocacy by that level or one(s) below it. For example, a position from a state study may be used by the state or a local League.

## • Interest Groups

Interest groups are informal groups formed to learn more about a topic, whether it is already part of the League's portfolio or in an area of interest that may lead to a new study or review. The purpose is learning and collaboration rather than the more formal study and advocacy. Currently, the League has interest groups on Education, Housing, and Justice.

## **Voter Service**

From its beginning, the League has not only encouraged people to vote, but to vote intelligently by informing themselves about political issues. Voter Service is one of the activities that most people in the community connect with the League of Women Voters.

In Portland, the League's Voter Service includes voter registration, public forums for candidates and ballot measures (recorded and viewable on demand on our website, [lwvpx.org](http://lwvpx.org)), Speakers Bureau, the *Voters' Guide* in printed form and in its online version at [Vote411.org](http://Vote411.org), *Video Voters' Guide*, and *The Directory of Elected Officials*. All voter service forums, speaking engagements and printed and online materials present balanced nonpartisan information.

## **LEAGUE STUDIES AND THE PROGRAM CYCLE**

### **League Studies and the Program Cycle**

At the national or state convention, or local annual meeting, the basic process for League action is the same. All topics on which the LWV acts are initiated at the local level. Each year members present to the national, state, or local board issues for new study or existing positions needing further investigation or review. Existing positions are also affirmed or recommended for deletion. The board at each level reviews the member recommendations and recommends to the respective annual meeting or convention new issues for study, existing positions for review or restudy, and positions for retention or deletion. At the national, state, or local level, the membership votes to accept, reject, or amend the board's recommendations. An annual meeting takes place locally each year; the state League holds its convention in odd-numbered years and the LWVUS holds its convention in even-numbered years. Positions derived at any League level through the study and consensus process form the basis for action.

**Program:** Program is the League term for issues that members have chosen for study and action. At local program planning meetings, members propose topics for local, state and national program. For LWV Portland, local means the City of Portland, Multnomah County, and Metro--our regional government (in conjunction with our sister Leagues in Clackamas and Washington counties). The proposals are submitted to the appropriate board level for approval. The board then presents a recommended program for adoption by members at the local annual meeting or by delegates to the state or national convention. The recommended program is the sum total of the League's positions (*see definition below*) on issues and may include proposals for study of new issues or updating previous positions.

**Study:** Once an issue is approved for study by any level of League, a study committee is established to gather information, to read, consider and discuss—that is, to do a *study*. Local study committees may supplement research with interviews of local officials, residents, or professionals and further fact-finding activities. Studies usually take two years.

**Consensus:** The study committee fashions *consensus* questions for discussion by the local membership, typically at unit meetings. Through examination of facts and discussion, a substantial agreement on these questions is reached by the members. Once members reach *consensus*, their recommended consensus is forwarded to the appropriate board, which develops a *position* based on the membership's recommendation.

**Position:** A position is a statement of member agreement based on consensus and approved by the appropriate board. If the study is local, the position will be developed and submitted to the members for approval at their annual meeting. If the study is a state or national study, local consensus statements are forwarded to the appropriate board, which will gather and combine consensus statements from other local Leagues to form a position. This position will be presented for approval to the delegates at state or national conventions. In some cases, a local, state or national position may be adopted by "concurrence" with a position of another League, which has thoroughly studied the issue. (See the definition of concurrence in the Glossary below.)

**Action:** Once a position has been adopted, the League can take action on issues and legislation that relate directly to the position. *Action* is a continuous process of working toward goals stated in positions established by member agreement. *Action* may include lobbying public officials through letters or other direct contacts, testifying at public hearings, organizing public forums and contacting media to inform the public. It is the responsibility of the appropriate board to plan and direct League *action*.

**New Issues:** In the course of taking action, through observers' reports or member interest, new issues may be encountered on which the League does not yet have a position. Then the process starts all over again on a new topic.

**Program Planning and State and National Biennial Conventions:** During December or January of every year local Leagues are asked to go through a process of reviewing all current positions (national and local positions one year and state and local positions the alternate year) for the purpose of recommending whether to propose a new study or update or discard older positions. The recommendations are forwarded to the appropriate Board and on the recommendation of the given Board will be presented at the local annual meeting or state or national convention for discussion and voting.

## GLOSSARY OF LEAGUE TERMS

**Action** - Advocacy on selected issues, involving concerted efforts to achieve public policies consistent with League positions, by informing and influencing government officials, the media, and the public.

**Action Alert** - Request from the local, state, or national League for members to take action in support of a League position.

**Annual Meeting** - This is the main business meeting of the year for the local League membership.

**Associate** - A nonvoting member of the League, such as a person under sixteen years of age.

**Board of Directors** - Administrative body consisting of elected officers plus elected and appointed directors. Those elected are also trustees of the League of Women Voters of Portland Education Fund.

**Civic Engagement/Community Education** - League meetings that are open to the public featuring expert speakers, responses to questions from audience members, and/or group discussions and other activities. Often recorded for streaming on the LWV website and for rebroadcast on public access television, their purpose is to provide reliable information about governmental processes and issues to members and the public. Also sometimes called "Programs" and "Civic Education."

**Concurrence** - Members are asked to concur, or agree, with a statement that may be a position held by another League or a decision statement recommended by a League board or study committee. The statement must be approved or rejected as written.

**Consensus** - Substantial agreement reached through group discussion. Consensus is the "sense of the group" rather than a majority opinion. Statements made on minority issues related to the study may be included in the consensus report.

**Consensus questions** - Specific questions prepared by a study committee to stimulate interaction, focus discussion, and facilitate conclusions by the group. Questions vary in style from open-ended to multiple choice. The appropriate League board approves questions in advance.

**Convention** - A state, or national League meeting where members elect officers and directors, adopt program, amend bylaws, and adopt a budget. Local Leagues send delegates to the state convention; state and local Leagues send delegates to the national convention.

**Council** - An assembly of delegates (state and national level) held in alternate years from conventions, to adopt a budget and assess program developments. Local Leagues send delegates to the state council; state Leagues to the national council.

**Discussion Units:** Small groups of League members who meet monthly (except December) during the school year to socialize and discuss governmental issues, League studies, League advocacy, and voter service. (See also Unit Meetings.)

**Education Fund** - This fund underwrites educational and Voters Service projects. It does not fund action on issues. Because the Education Fund is a 501(c)3, gifts to this fund are tax-deductible.

**Election Forums** - Public meetings on candidate and ballot measures, whether in person or in audio or visual media.

**Forums** - Voter Service public meetings focused on candidates and ballot measures.

**Interest Group** - League members who gather together in a small group to learn about a specific topic. These groups sometimes take field trips, invite speakers, or discuss articles or books about the topic, but they are not doing an approved LWV study of the subject.

**Nonpartisan** - Describes the League's policy of not supporting or opposing political parties or candidates.

**Observers** - Representatives of the League who silently monitor the public meetings of elected and non-elected governmental bodies.

**PMP (Per Member Payment)** - An annual assessment for each local League member that is paid by the local League to the national and state Leagues. About 80% of local dues are paid out in this way. Dues and PMP amounts are debated and voted upon at each level of League during budget discussions at conventions or annual meetings.

**Portfolio** - A specific responsibility carried by a board member or an off-board member to monitor one of the main areas of League activities, such as Civic Engagement or Voter Service.

**Position** - A statement of the League's point of view on an issue, derived through member study and agreement (consensus or concurrence), approved by the appropriate board, and used as a basis for League action on public policy issues. Action is taken based on positions.

**Program** - League Program is the education and advocacy platform that we adopt to move our mission forward. According to the LWV Bylaws, the program shall consist of action to implement the Principles and those governmental issues chosen by the convention/annual meeting for concerted study or concurrence and action.

**Programs** — See *Civic Engagement/Community Education*

**Speakers Bureau** – A volunteer group of LWV members who are trained to present nonpartisan and neutral information about ballot measures, other governmental issues, or LWV information about voting or the League. The Speakers Bureau responds to requests from the public to do presentations to various community groups.

**Study** - The process of gathering information on a specific issue for discussion and subsequent consensus, in order to establish positions. Studies take one to three years and involve extensive research including interviews with experts on all sides of an issue.

**Unit Meetings** - Small group meetings held monthly for League members. Units may be time-oriented (day, evening, lunch hour), geographically oriented, or both. Used for discussion of study topics, informational civic programs or other activities of interest to members. See also Discussion Units.

**Vertical Position** - Authorization for one level of League to advocate on the basis of a position reached at a higher level of League.

**Video Voters' Guide** – Recorded online interviews with individual candidates running in an upcoming Primary or General Election. All candidates (of all parties or nonpartisan) for a particular local or state office are invited to participate in these recorded interviews, which are then posted on the League's website.

**Voters' Guide** - Nonpartisan publication giving candidates' background and responses to selected questions as well as in-depth information on ballot measures.

**Vote411.org** - Online information on voting and elections. The LWV of Oregon (LWVOR) calls their online voting information Vote Oregon

**Voter Service** - Activities and information that assist voters in voting and making informed choices. They include voter registration, candidate and ballot measure forums, Speakers Bureau, the biennial *Directory of Elected Officials*, the *Voters' Guide*, Video Voters' Guide, and podcasts of recorded forums and candidate interviews.