

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LEAGUE ADVOCACY AND VOTER SERVICE

At the League's founding in 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt noted the anomaly of being a political yet non-partisan organization: "We want political things; we want legislation; we are going to educate for citizenship. In that body we have got to be non-partisan and all-partisan..."

Nonpartisan means that the League does not support or oppose any candidate or political party. Nonpartisanship is the underpinning for the League's highly regarded and highly valued reputation as a source of accurate and unbiased information on governmental issues and elections.

In addition to the importance of maintaining nonpartisanship, Leagues must distinguish between advocacy and voters service/citizen information. The latter is designed to give citizens facts on issues so they can make their own decisions; League does not recommend a course of action. In contrast, League advocacy, based on member study and agreement on selected issues, involves action in support of or opposition to specific measures and does seek to influence the opinion of others.

Problems can arise in any election year; the League's mission of providing nonpartisan voters service may be compromised by its advocacy on program issues. How can Leagues advocate on a high profile election issue and remain nonpartisan? What kind of voter information can Leagues provide that is nonpartisan and conforms with voters service/citizen information requirements?

The answers to questions about what Leagues can and cannot do are not always governed by hard and fast rules. The following guidelines are offered to assist local Leagues in making judgments that will safeguard the reservoir of public trust that is essential to the League's effectiveness in the public policy arena.

A. Candidate Forums or Voters Service Issue Meetings

1. Planning. League members involved in high profile election issues should not be involved in planning candidate forums or voters service issue meetings. It is appropriate for such members to consult with voters service chairs/committees for such purposes as alerting them to the sensitivity of particular issues and suggesting appropriate questions for candidates.
2. Questions. Pose questions in a neutral way without reference to the League's position. Questions should be framed to give candidates an opportunity to explain their positions rather than to elicit a yes or no response. For example, there is a vast difference between asking,

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"The League of Women Voters supports a campaign finance reform, do you?" versus "What changes, if any, would you recommend in regard to Illinois' current campaign contributions disclosure laws?" The public could infer League support for or opposition to a candidate based on the response to the first question. The second question does not state the League position and gives the candidate an opportunity to make substantive policy points.

3. Providing Information. Voter service information may not describe League positions and may not advocate for or against specific legislation or ballot issues. For example:
 - a. LWVIL positions should not be distributed or promoted.
 - b. A handout that objectively presents pros and cons on a ballot issue would be appropriate.
 - c. League membership information may be available at a debate or public forum.

B. Ballot Propositions

If your League has a position on a particular ballot question, you should be in an advocacy mode. It would be appropriate in such cases to hold a separate meeting on the ballot proposal where the League would present its position. When a League is in an advocacy mode, it will need to make a strategic decision about whether or not to provide any information on the ballot question at a voters service event, since such information must include both pros and cons.

C. Advocacy Activities

Advocacy activities can continue during election season as long as they are distinct from voters service activities. For example, it is appropriate for the League to sponsor a program on campaign finance reform or distribute information on a Making Democracy Work project or advocate for measures to protect women's access to reproductive health care at a program or general meeting that is not related to voters service. It is essential that League members who are visible in advocacy campaigns not be involved in voter service activities. Conversely, League voter service chairs should not be involved in advocacy activities.

D. Preventing Public Confusion

In spite of your safeguards, the League's unique role as a nonpartisan advocate can result in public confusion, particularly when the League is active on a controversial issue or is actively promoting an issue which is the position of a candidate. If someone challenges the League's nonpartisanship in the context of any advocacy activity, you can make the following points:

1. The League is a multi-issue organization that has positions on a myriad of issues and is pleased when lawmakers support any of our positions.
2. Members attending state League conventions and local League annual meetings readopt positions and determine action focus, the basis of our advocacy agenda. Our constant and diligent review of our program, and hence our action agenda, is evaluated and determined on the merits of the issue.