

Opportunity for Guidance: Nonpartisanship

August 2013

APPRECIATIVE ICEBREAKER

“The League shall not support or oppose any political party or any candidate.”

- Article III, Sec.2, LWVUS Bylaws

- What does it mean to be nonpartisan?
- How do others understand and use the term nonpartisan?
- What does it mean to our reputation and the public’s trust in the League?
- How are we being proactive in defining the League as nonpartisan?

GUIDANCE

The organization’s roots began during the long struggle to get women the right to vote and the League has continued the fight to educate both women and men on the issues impacting their communities. Soon after our founding, the decision was made to take positions on issues but to neither support nor oppose any political party or candidate (appointed or elected) for public office. Today, this policy continues to ensure that the League’s voice is heard above the tumult of party politics. As it can sometimes be difficult for new members and leaders and/or the public to understand our “political but nonpartisan” ethos, we wanted to present this guidance.

Proactively Marketing the League’s Nonpartisan Orientation

The League’s strength is in its work to **educate and inform voters in a factual and nonpartisan way**. We are **community-based** and present **information on all sides of an issue to help voters decide, rather than taking political positions**. That information/education function is a key value, seen by the public as even more necessary and more rare in today’s world of biased ads and media.

Some things to consider when marketing the League in your community:

- Emphasize the role of the League in educating and informing voters.
- Reiterate that the League is not partisan and explain what this means – i.e. “The League does not support or oppose any political party or candidate.”
- Emphasize the grassroots, local aspect of the League and that issues the League addresses are based on community needs and priorities.
- Cite the League’s long 93-year history and provide information about successes over the years.
- Emphasize the League’s commitment to providing nonpartisan, fact-based information about candidates and issues to help voters make their own decisions.
- Cite the organization’s involvement in debates and voter guides.

Actions Leagues Can Take to Protect Nonpartisan Reputation

To ensure the credibility of the League as a nonpartisan organization, each League’s board of directors is responsible for annually reviewing, adopting and carrying out its own nonpartisan policy and for seeing that both its members and the public understand the League’s nonpartisan role.



While the LWVUS has guidance and sample nonpartisan policies Leagues can use as models, it is the responsibility of each local League board to formulate and adopt its own nonpartisan policy which conforms to this bylaw, and to determine the limitations to be placed on board members' activities to maintain the League's nonpartisanship.

Being nonpartisan toward candidates and political parties is critical to the effectiveness of the League's unique voters' service/citizen information work. This does not mean that the League isn't political. Our nonpartisan stance provides a strong foundation for the work done in support of issues. Action on legislation and ballot proposals is more effective when the public and the legislators know for certain that the League's conclusions are based on merit rather than playing politics.

When you review your League's nonpartisan policy, be sure to consider the whole picture; the League and the community you serve and the new ways your League is sharing information in person, in print and online. It is much easier to make sound decisions when dealing within a framework of consistency and common sense. Don't try to build a policy statement around an individual case. A few things to keep in mind while reviewing your League's nonpartisan policy:

- The visibility associated with specific political activities
- The visibility associated with specific League roles
- Social media visibility
- The possible effects on neighboring Leagues who share the same officials

Determine what limitations should be placed on board members seeking or holding elective or party affiliated offices (e.g. committee person or elections inspector). Although LWVUS' guidance is that local board members not run for partisan elective office, some leeway is given in defining "elective office."

Accused of being Partisan?

No matter what the League does, there will be times when the LWV is accused of being partisan. If the League has good leadership, planned its actions wisely, and acted within its own policies, there is no need to be upset by charges of partisanship. The most often used tactics are intimidation and threats (e.g., "I won't come to your Candidates Meeting."; "I won't meet with you."; "I am going to the newspapers.") When the League has followed its own rules and remained polite but firm, it has usually managed to gain the needed cooperation. In short, don't be scared off by bluster!

Remind - "The League does NOT support or oppose any political party or any candidate. "

Explain - The difference between League program and voters' service activities.

Remember – The League has the option to leverage public opinion.

They say the best defense is a good offense – proactively declare and show your true nonpartisanship. It is always possible to print a fact sheet showing both sides of the problem; it is also possible to hold a forum. The best results come from careful planning and a calculated response.

Resources:

LWVUS nonpartisan policy - <http://www.lwv.org/files/Nonpartisan%20Policy.pdf>

Voters' Guide best practices - <http://www.lwv.org/content/voters%E2%80%99-guides-best-practices>