



Memo from Mary Wilson

Remarks about the League's Consensus Process:

From its inception the advocacy work of the League of Women Voters has been directed at issues on which action by a branch of government will have an impact on the lives of individuals and on our democracy. We use our advocacy voice to spur government to take action that will have a positive effect on the issues about which we care. In other words, the advocacy work of the League focuses on "making a difference" on public policymaking.

At our national Convention, delegates may select a new issue (or new twist on an old issue) to study further because they think the voice of the League could be useful as the different branches of government develop policies about that issue. But, in order to speak about the issue, we must "discover" how League members feel about that issue. The process by which the League makes that discovery is called study and consensus. The first step is vital: **STUDY**. League members across the country must look at all sides of an issue, study the facts, the ramifications of all approaches to that issue, alternative solutions, the impacts on people, places and things, the costs and benefits. Only after studying the issue do League members come together in their own local Leagues to discuss that issue at a meeting to arrive at the "consensus" of their League on the issue. The results of all local Leagues discussing the issue are compiled to determine the consensus of the League as a whole. **CONSENSUS** is not a vote - rather, consensus is a mutual agreement of League members arrived at through civil discourse, the hallmark of the League of Women Voters.

In the process of discussing the issue, League members must turn the issue upside down, sideways, backwards and forwards. Because of our nature, training, upbringing, experience and hearing others' ideas, League members will see an issue differently. In fact we cherish the fact that we bring different perspectives on issues. Because the process of coming to consensus is an amalgam of members' thoughts, ideas and ways of looking at the facts, members attending the consensus meeting must dig deeply into the issue. That is why we cannot typically pose a consensus question in the frame of "Do you support the NPV compact approach to electing the President?" Consensus questions are designed to spark a discourse about the issue akin to the discussion we would expect policymakers to have when they deliberate the issue. Consensus questions are not black and white, yes or no questions. There is no right or wrong answer to a consensus question.

Because the League over the years has adopted a number of positions about issues that may be affected by the consensus we reach on a new issue, we often must develop consensus questions that make our members think about our other positions and balance and weigh how they feel about a new issue against what they feel about an "old" issue. For example, we have a position that supports uniformity in voting systems. Adoption of

the NPV compact could create voting systems for President in compact states that are different than those in non-compact states. That is why in question 6 on the NPV compact study, the question was asked about the relative importance of the concept of having "uniform voting systems" vis á vis the concept of having a form of popular election of the President. Which do League members value the most?

Another example of a consensus question that might puzzle new members is one that is needed because the issue we are studying embodies another issue that the League has never studied. This was true in the recent study. The Board recognized that there are important Constitutional questions that the League has never studied that might be affected by a consensus favoring the NPV compact. For example, the League supporting the NPV compact would require that we, as an organization, say we think it is okay to alter a basic element of the Constitution, i.e., how we elect the President, by some means other than direct amendment of the Constitution. We needed to know if members really felt strongly about the amendment process established by the founding fathers (an issue we had never studied) or whether they could accept another means for changing a basic principle in the Constitution, the electoral college. Thus, we asked the first question about amending the Constitution.

I use these examples as illustrations of the way that consensus questions are designed to spark our brains to think about what we know about the issue and what we value about principles inherent in the particular issue that we would not be likely to delve into if we just ask a "yes or no" question. Many would say that is the *challenge* of participating in a consensus meeting. Others would say that is the *fun* of participating in a consensus meeting. But, whether you see it as a challenge or as fun, I hope that we all commit ourselves to making sure all of our members understand the process. I intend to ask the Board to approve development of a training module on the consensus process as a part of our leadership development training project in order to assist you in training our members.