

## **NONPARTISAN POLITICAL POLICY AND LOCAL LEAGUE BOARDS**

"The League shall not support or oppose any political party or any candidate."  
- Article II, Sec. 2, LWVUS Bylaws

It is clear from the above bylaw of the national League that a League may not support or oppose any political party, any candidate for elective office, any office holder or any group which supports candidates.

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. *Each year* the board should review its own policy and, if necessary, adapt the policy to suit the particular needs of the time and community. Even if no changes are necessary, the review is important, both to educate board members and to clarify areas which might otherwise cause confusion later in the year.

The board should discuss its nonpartisan policy at the first board meeting after the annual meeting. League Basics (*In League*): (LWVUS) is a helpful reference. During their discussion board members should keep in mind the following:

- the League's credibility as an effective political organization in the community
- the sensitivity of specific board portfolios (i.e., president, voters service, etc.)
- the extent to which the public identifies a board member's activities with those of the League
- political climate and traditions in the community
- the visibility associated with specific political activities
- the possible effects on neighboring Leagues who share the same officials
- the possible effects on the ability of League lobbyists at any level to function effectively.

### **DISCUSSION OUTLINE**

#### **I. Purpose of League's nonpartisan policy**

Nonpartisanship toward candidates and political parties is critical to the effectiveness of the League's unique voters service/citizen information work. It also 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 believe that the League's conclusions are based on merit rather than politics.

#### **II. Applying the nonpartisan policy at the local League level**

Discuss each aspect of potential policy and refer to the criteria suggested by LWVUS. 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. If there has been an instance of "conflict of interest" on the board in the past year or so, or one is anticipated, this will surely come up during discussion. It may provide some useful guidance as to the kind of policy decisions which will fit each situation best; a final nonpartisan statement should be rooted in principle rather than constructed around individual problems.

Part of local board policy was determined by the 1972 LWVUS convention which pointed out specifically that:

- the political activities of a spouse or relative of a board member should be considered separate and distinct from the activities of the board member;
- public notices released by a League announcing the resignation of a board member to run for political office should be carefully worded to avoid the appearance of endorsing the resigning member's candidacy; and,

- the League's nonpartisan reputation is strong enough to ensure that personal gifts from office holders or candidates can be accepted without being misconstrued as endorsement of the donors. Local Leagues, however, cannot accept funds from member items in the state budget.

Determine what limitations should be placed on board members seeking or holding elective or party affiliated offices (such as committee person or elections inspector). Although LWVUS's bylaw mandates that local board members not run for elective office, considerable leeway is allowed in defining "elective office." (See League Basics (*In League.*))

- Are there exceptions dependent on the visibility of a particular board member?
- Should off-board members who are closely identified with the League be required to meet the same criteria?

Determine what, if any, limitations should be put on board members who participate in the following activities:

- making financial contributions to candidates and/or political parties;
- participating in behind-the-scenes efforts for candidates, such as telephoning, stuffing envelopes, writing position papers, etc.;
- publicly supporting a candidate for partisan political office;
- circulating or signing nominating petitions, referendum petitions;
- attending coffees or other gatherings to meet candidates;
- holding coffees for candidates seeking political office and/or nonpartisan office;
- attending fundraising functions for candidates or political parties;
- holding an appointive political office.
- holding office in another organization which supports or opposes political parties or candidates.

Determine what limitations should be placed on ads accepted for local League publications. The following LWVNYS board policy is offered as an example:

"Ads accepted for state League publications should indicate support for the League and should not solicit or suggest support for a candidate or political party. If advertising is received from a candidate or political party, a statement should appear on the same page stating that the League does not support or oppose political parties or candidates. Such ads should not appear in the two-month period prior to election."

After discussing each consideration and reaching agreement, have the recording secretary read back that which has been agreed upon. When starting from the very beginning, appoint three or four board members to write a nonpartisan policy statement based on the areas of agreement and bring it to the next board meeting for approval. If amending an existing policy, amend it at the same meeting. The 1972 national convention encouraged a positive approach, recommending that guidelines should emphasize what board members may do, rather than what they may not do.

After approval, all board members should have copies of the statement. Nominating committee members should also have copies and should alert prospective officers and directors to the nonpartisan responsibility of each board member. The policy should be published in your bulletin. Remember to send a copy to your state League office annually.

### III. In Conclusion

The nonpartisan policy governs League activities and limits board members activities. However, individual members who are interested in the political process are encouraged to participate fully in party activities.

As long as the League does not endorse candidates or political parties it is nonpartisan. However, the League's nonpartisan stance does not mean that the League should not get involved in controversy on issues it has chosen for study, consensus and action. A League will be a strong and effective political force to the degree that it can accept controversy, live with uncertainty and not use its nonpartisan political policy as a shield for not getting involved.