

League Program

Study to Action in Ten Steps

A Guide to League Study, Consensus, and Concurrence

League of Women Voters of Texas

May 2007



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LEAGUE PROGRAM: STUDY TO ACTION IN TEN STEPS



A Guide to League Study, Consensus, and Concurrence

- **League positions are based on study and represent substantial agreement among our members.**
- **Reaching member agreement on what will become League advocacy positions is the goal of League study and is required before action can be taken.**
- **Studies take place at all three levels of the League, depending on the level of government capable of making the changes members seek.**
- **Consensus and concurrence are the two decision-making processes the League uses to reach member agreement. Whichever method is used, it must respect the League's grassroots structure, nonpartisanship, and the distinction between education and advocacy.**

INTRODUCTION: The League Study

The study of government issues is one of the basic functions of the League of Women Voters. Study is undertaken at all three levels: national, state, and local, and leads to both education and advocacy, two of the basic missions of the organization. The League's process for study has acquired a solid reputation for its in-depth and unbiased exploration of an issue, which is then submitted to its grassroots membership for informed discussion. Consensus or concurrence of the members on various aspects of this issue results in a League program position. Such a position becomes the foundation for League advocacy (action).

This study process is designed to produce a credible, unbiased product and, at the same time, maximize member input and involvement. A local study is within the capabilities of a League of any size: large Leagues have the person power to take on large, complicated issues, and Leagues with fewer resources undertake more limited studies. But regardless of circumstances, local Leagues should plan to periodically conduct a local issue study. The study process has enormous potential to increase membership, visibility, and support while performing an important, if not unique, service for the community.

A successful effort to reach member agreement produces a clearly stated position which is enthusiastically supported by League members. When members are well informed about the pros and cons of an issue, and when they have had the opportunity to participate in the agreement process, they become effective advocates for the positions. That makes the whole organization successful. After decades of reaching member agreement, the League has identified the elements of successful efforts to build consensus or reach concurrence.

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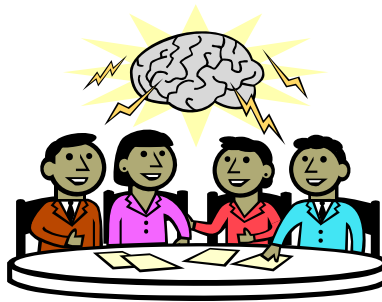
Related resources are listed on page 25. .

PROGRAM PLANNING AND ADOPTION

1. Be sure there is clear member support for adoption of the study item.

- Program planning is itself a member agreement process.
- *Members* offer ideas for new studies or action on existing positions. The *board* determines whether there is sufficient support to recommend the item for adoption.
- Study items must fall within League Principles (see Appendix I) and follow procedures for adoption found in bylaws and Annual Meeting rules.
- Whether a study is proposed by the board or reaches the floor of the Annual Meeting as a not-recommended item, its focus and scope must be clearly worded.
- Sometimes members ask for a study when what they really want is education about the local aspects of an existing local, state, or national position (This would be an Update).

Choosing a Study Topic: The Program Planning Meeting



Choosing a study topic involves the entire membership, and the process is begun at a program planning meeting early in the calendar year. If it is the fall of an odd-numbered year, then state and national program planning needs to be done as well, in preparation for the State and National conventions in the spring of even-numbered years. Program planning materials will be sent to all local Leagues from the LWVUS and LWV-Texas to facilitate review of current program and gather suggestions for new studies.

It is the Program Vice-President's responsibility to organize the local program planning meeting and to prepare any material deemed useful in order to stimulate the members' thinking on a variety of options. Below is a list of tools to consider using.

Sources of Study Topics

- your own members
- members of prior study committees
- your League's observers at various governmental meetings
- the local media and other community resources
- suggestions by public officials, civic leaders, members of local boards and commissions
- other Leagues' or similar organizations' studies
- a local program exploratory committee formed to research possible program issues.

For Background Information

- *Impact On Issues*, LWVUS (an explanation of LWVUS program).
- *Program Perspectives*, LWV-TX (an explanation of LWV-TX program).
- local League bylaws and policies
- current local League positions
- *In League*, LWVUS

Often members may take action under existing state and national positions. In these cases, members want to understand the local aspects of issues so that their action will be better informed. This goal does not require a study. Creating an educational publication (an Update) could meet the need with much less work than a study.

Criteria for choosing program

- Is this issue politically relevant? Can a local governmental body address it? Is it timely?
- Can the League be effective on this issue? Will it generate opportunities for education and advocacy by the League?
- Does the issue fall within the League Principles? (See Appendix I)
- Is it a manageable topic for your League to study? Are the members and the resources available? Is there strong member interest? Is there a potential for coalitions with other community groups?



Member support for an item relies on a clear understanding of the study proposal. No matter who proposes it, the study item should be carefully worded to describe its focus (the main statement of the topic to be studied) and the scope (the areas to be explored and the general parameters of the study). Sometimes the study committee may define the scope as they plan the study, as they will have more time to give the parameters careful thought.

Giving the Proposed Study Focus and Scope

The FOCUS is the main statement of the topic to be studied. Wording should be brief and intelligible to both League members and the community at large. It should state its intent clearly, but the wording should be general enough to allow flexibility as the work proceeds. Implied conclusions and negative wording should always be avoided.

Good Examples:

- “A study of the feasibility of recycling in Hometown” (a rather broad topic)
- “A study of housing alternatives for the elderly in Hometown” (more specific but still general)

Bad examples:

- “A study of recycling” or “A study of housing” (too vast)
- “A study to determine whether housing for the elderly in Hometown should be integrated with other public housing or be separate and what types of facilities should it include” (too specific)

The SCOPE provides a more detailed explanation of the Focus, outlining the areas to be explored, and the general parameters of the study.

Good Examples:

- “Study the range of possible methods for recycling waste products, with particular attention to paper recycling”
- “Study methods of private and public collection of recyclable materials, including cost-effectiveness”
- “Study the current housing stock for the elderly; assess future needs, funding availability, community resources and support”

Bad Examples:

“Interview senior citizens and agency heads”

“Organize go-see trip to elderly housing sites”

“Plan a general meeting with housing experts and senior citizens’ advocates as speakers”

After the program planning meeting, the Program Vice-President submits to the board a prioritized list of all the topics suggested. The board reviews the proposed items to ensure that they fit all the League criteria, and then decides which study item(s), if any, it will recommend to the membership at the Annual Meeting.

The board reviews the wording of the focus and the scope of the selected study and makes any changes it deems necessary. This then becomes the “recommended program.” The Annual Meeting workbook *must* list both the “recommended program” and the “not-recommended program,” i.e., all topics discussed or suggested by members during the program planning process.

The Annual Meeting

At the Annual Meeting only the item(s) recommended by the board and the not-recommended items listed along with them may be debated, amended, and voted on. Amendments may not change the intent or enlarge the scope of the study. Members vote to adopt program for the ensuing year according to the provision of the local bylaws.

Studies are adopted at the Annual Meeting unless bylaws allow emergency adoption at other times. Bylaws and Annual Meeting rules lay out procedures for both. League studies must fit within League Principles, which are broad concepts of good government. Members should carefully evaluate whether topics fit League Principles.

Adopting an item for study does not mean agreement will necessarily be reached. However, League studies are structured to anticipate agreement and eventual action. Most studies result in agreement on the majority of issues discussed.



CONSENSUS AND CONCURRENCE

2. Have the board approve an appropriate member agreement process



- The two processes for reaching member agreement in the League are consensus and concurrence. Both are valid ways for groups to reach decisions.
 - The process to be used is selected by the board unless the Annual Meeting delegates choose it.
 - Consensus in the League is defined as agreement among a substantial number of members, representative of the membership as a whole, reached after sustained study and group discussion. Consensus is not a vote.
-
- Concurrence is a vote to accept or reject a proposed position statement.
 - Concurrence is most appropriate when agreement is likely to be reached easily.
 - Consensus discussions produce *group opinion*. Polling and concurrence are collections of *individual opinions*.
 - Study to some extent is required before both concurrence and consensus.
 - There is typically no chance to modify the concurrence statement.

The two processes of reaching member agreement used by the League are consensus and concurrence. Both terms are used in other contexts but have unique meanings in the League. Historically, the League has primarily used consensus, but the use of concurrence has grown in recent years. Consensus tends to produce stronger support for the positions reached, but it is slow. Concurrence is a good alternative in many circumstances, including extending an existing position or adopting a position already held by another League. Consensus inside the League enhances member skills for managing public policy disputes outside the League.

The decision to use consensus or concurrence to seek member agreement may be made by delegates to the Annual Meeting at the time the study item is adopted, in which case the board is bound by that decision. Often, however, members leave the decision to be made by the board after research has begun and the complexity of the issues unveiled. The study committee should consider the alternatives and recommend consensus or concurrence to the board. As the elected representatives of the membership, the board makes the choice.

Consensus in the League is defined as agreement among a substantial number of members, representative of the membership as a whole, reached after sustained study and group discussion. Consensus is a sense of what the group supports, not a vote. (There is no “census” in consensus.) It is not a simple majority, nor is it necessarily unanimity. It is a decision with which participants are comfortable overall. While they may not like all the points of agreement, they may be comfortable with the overall result because they gained some things important to them though they lost others. While voting naturally polarizes

people unless the vote is unanimous, consensus is a unifying process. It is most appropriate to use consensus when a study item is complex and especially when it is both complicated and controversial.

Concurrence is the process of determining whether or not there is agreement with a proposed position statement. The statement may be proposed by the delegates at the Annual Meeting, or the board may propose a position statement. The board members may develop the words themselves or take them from the positions of other Leagues or groups. The statement usually cannot be modified; however, if all those who will participate in the concurrence are in the same room, the board may be willing to accept an amended statement representing the group's agreement. In most circumstances, concurrence statements are not changed. This avoids having different people concur with different statements, thereby nullifying the agreement.

Concurrence is based on individual opinion, whereas consensus is based on group opinion. Consensus is interactive. Concurrence is not. However, concurrence can be designed to be interactive with individuals influenced by the group before they vote if the concurrence statement is first discussed at a meeting.

Concurrence is most appropriate when...

- the issues are simple and the questions easily answered
- the subject is one about which people are already knowledgeable
- members want to reaffirm support for an existing position following an update on the issue
- only a small change is needed to extend a current position
- a current position needs clarification that is more than an editorial change but likely to be supported
- a League wishes to adopt a position already held by another League

The League discussion unit was designed to promote consensus discussions. While few Leagues have units, a general meeting can be conducted with small group discussions to encourage discussion. Consensus can also be conducted by distributing questionnaires to members, but no interaction occurs and any agreement reached will be based on a collection of individual opinions rather than the opinion of the group.

Concurrence is easier to conduct than consensus because the issues and questions are usually simpler. A meeting to determine concurrence is helpful when the concurrence statement is a long one or when the subject is one not generally understood short of reading League materials. Alternately or additionally, a proposed position statement may be mailed to members, put in the VOTER, distributed electronically, or be the subject of a phone poll.

THE STUDY COMMITTEE

3. Open the study process to all members.

- **League studies must produce balanced, unbiased information representing a diversity of views on the study topic. The board is responsible for seeing that the study process is open and fair in order to avoid biased research and results.**
- **Though few may join the committee, members should know they are welcome no matter their views on the topic.**
- **The board appoints the study chair or co-chairs and ensures the study committee is balanced overall.**
- **The chair or co-chairs must be willing to look at all sides of the issue.**

To present unbiased, thorough information on a study item, the study process must be open to all members. Few may take advantage of the study chair's requests for their participation on the study committee, but they won't feel left out if the offer is made.

Invite people to join the committee by...

- asking for help at meetings
- passing around sign-up sheets
- placing ads in the VOTER
- calling members likely to be interested
- calling new members

After adoption of the local program, it is the responsibility of the Program Vice-President, with the help of other board members, to select a chair for the study, and to help organize a study committee. The board appoints a chair who is willing to look at all sides of the issue, and determine whether or not chairmanship is a board position. If the only volunteer is obviously biased, find a co-chair from the opposite view or one strong in League process. Be sure the committee's viewpoint is balanced. The board is ultimately responsible for ensuring that study materials and consensus questions are unbiased. The job is easier if the committee members represent various opinions.

The study chair's responsibilities are:

- to recruit, with the help of the Program Vice-President, a committee large enough to handle all aspects of the study
- to create and coordinate a timeline and a calendar for the study
- to schedule and chair regular committee meetings
- to delegate job and research assignments; to keep the study moving and on track
- to disseminate information on the subject of the study to the membership through periodic newsletter articles
- to organize, with the help of the committee members, periodic membership meetings on the study issue to educate members and/or the community at large on the various aspects of the topic being explored

- to develop, together with the committee, a set of consensus questions for the membership to discuss and answer at the conclusion of the study
- to submit regular reports to the board, as well as any public announcements, press releases, and the consensus questions for its review and approval
- to keep in close communication with the Program Vice-President on all facets of the study (the Program Vice-President serves as ex-officio committee member)
- to draw up a budget for the study, obtain board approval for expenses in advance, keep track of disbursements for the Treasurer's records
- to select and brief resource people prior to consensus meetings. For State and National studies, a Leader's Guide is written for this purpose.

Non-members may be asked to serve on League study committees. If a variety of perspectives are represented on the committee, a diversity of views will emerge. The work will be divided among more people, and an audience for educational forums and study materials will be created. To avoid conflicts, agree to ground rules for working together. Sometimes conflict occurs because only League members are allowed to participate in consensus meetings. Non-members who serve on a study committee may feel unfairly excluded from the consensus. To avoid conflict, have a clear understanding from the beginning of the study process that the work of non-members ends with the completion of the study materials (the educational portion of the study). Non-members may always be invited to join the League in order to participate during consensus!

The responsibilities of the study committee are:

- to develop an "outlook for work;"
- to gather information and prepare material for the membership in a *Facts & Issues* or final report;
- to develop questions for discussion and consensus by the membership for prior board approval;
- to plan and organize workshops, discussion meetings, panel presentations, public forums, or any other means of informing and educating the members and, if possible, the community at large, on the issue under study.



The Outlook for Work is a general plan for the study based on its focus and scope as well as on the time available for the work involved. It should include:

- ✓ a statement of the study item, focus and scope
- ✓ an elaboration of the scope
- ✓ a calendar with deadlines for research, interviews, go-see tours and other activities, including preparation of written material (*Facts & Issues*)
- ✓ suggestions for resource materials needed
- ✓ plans for member/community education and involvement (number and types of meetings needed)
- ✓ possible action to which the study might lead

Tasks for the Committee Members

Research: Committee members should research pros and cons of all aspects of the issue and include results in the final material. Printed resources may include, but not be limited to:

- current laws, ordinances, statutes, codes, etc.
- publications, such as books by experts on the subject, pamphlets from organizations or agencies, studies by other Leagues, newspapers, periodicals, etc.
- budgets and minutes from appropriate government departments or agencies
- pamphlets, fact sheets, and reports from conferences and forums on the issue



Interviews: People are among the best sources of information. They may include:

- local officials involved or interested in the issue;
- heads of agencies that work with the issue;
- community activists interested in the issue;
- any individuals with knowledge about or experience with the issue (see Appendix II for interview tips).

Questionnaires or surveys: Feedback from appropriate groups, as well as from other Leagues, may be helpful.

Community monitoring: Observers should attend the meetings of any local government body, agency, board, or commission likely to be involved in taking action on the study item.

Clippings: Monitor the print media for articles, as well as radio and television for comments relevant to the study topic.

Tours: Visit an appropriate site or facility (for the committee or the membership at large) to help gain a better understanding of the issue.

Meetings: Organize a general meeting or public forum with invited experts as speakers or panelists.

Writing: Periodic *VOTER* articles on the topic will keep the membership informed and interested while the study is in progress. The final report (*Facts and Issues*), for the membership to read before the consensus meeting, is the most important document. (See #5 below.)

Remember to allow sufficient time for the editing and the production of any written materials. The President has authority over the final document.

WRITING THE CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

4. Develop good consensus questions or concurrence statements.

- **Word the study proposal to cover areas where members anticipate questions.**
- **List questions that research reveals are important.**
- **Draft the consensus questions or concurrence statements for board approval.**

The process of developing good consensus questions begins with the wording of the study item adopted by members. Its scope should indicate areas where members anticipate questions because they hope a position will be developed. Annual Meeting discussion may provide ideas. Committee research will also identify the topics to cover.

Consensus questions take time to develop. They should be drafted, revised, and refined by the study committee before being submitted to the board for approval. It helps to have them drafted by several people: an expert on the issue, an expert on the consensus process, and a grammarian! No matter what the committee proposes, the board will probably make some changes.

The board is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the questions are appropriate. Responses to consensus questions are the basis for a potential position on which the organization will act for many years.

Good consensus questions should...

- be short and simple
- be unbiased
- not lead to a “right” answer
- have no emotionally loaded words
- not be too open-ended or future leaders will not know what the position means
- not be too narrow or geared to specific legislation or they will become outdated quickly
- be general goal statements, without too many specifics
- be able to be answered by an informed non-expert
- lead to positions that will permit action for many years
- be able to be answered in the time available and with the information provided



Unlike consensus questions, concurrence statements propose a League position. They do not need to be unbiased or balanced. But they should exhibit the other characteristics described above.

THE FACTS AND ISSUES PUBLICATION

5. Inform members about the issues.

- **Common knowledge of both facts and issues is the basis for member agreement.**
- **The goal is informed members, not experts.**
- **All of the educational efforts must be unbiased and balanced and cover the information needed to answer the consensus questions or concurrence statement.**
- **Education about the study issue can be carried out in a variety of ways to serve both members and the public.**
- **In the future, the board will decide when action is permitted based on member understanding and agreement on this issue. The groundwork is laid when members understand the issues on which member agreement is sought.**

Members must be given a common base of knowledge to be able to reach agreement in a reasonable amount of time. The state League often publishes *Facts and Issues* for this purpose. The national League provides educational material in the National VOTER so all members receive it. They also post background papers on the LWVUS website. Local Leagues may follow either or both of these methods, but should be sure all members receive the basics.

Final Report: The Facts and Issues:

Once as much information as possible has been gathered it is necessary to compile and edit the collected data into a clear, succinct, and objective report. Charts and graphs should be included when appropriate. The information presented should be:

- factual
- reduced to its essentials
- well balanced among pro and con opinions
- clearly attributed whenever appropriate
- sufficient to cover all areas in which consensus is being sought
- written in clearly understandable language in a well organized, attractive and readable format
- completely non-partisan and not advocating any position

The material is generally collected, written up, and submitted to the committee chair, who then writes the final draft. The members should receive the *Facts and Issues* and consensus questions well in advance of the consensus meeting.

The board is responsible for ensuring that members are exposed to a variety of views on the issues and that print materials are unbiased and balanced. Events such as workshops and issue forums must meet this same standard, as must online educational efforts. Investing in education on issues not only facilitates member agreement but also increases public awareness and understanding of the issue and the possibilities for change.

Ways to educate members about the study item facts and issues...

- VOTER article or series of articles
- study publications
- background papers attached to the VOTER
- issue forums or panel discussions
- go-see tours
- workshops
- newspaper clippings
- online discussion groups
- online publications



Offering a variety of ways to learn about the subject increases the chance of members later participating in the member agreement process. If the educational materials and events are funded with Education Fund money, they must also be for the public.

PREPARING FOR CONSENSUS

6. Inform members about the *process* for reaching member agreement and provide opportunities to participate.

- **In a grassroots organization, members must understand how and why to take part in the consensus or concurrence.**
- **Consensus can be intimidating to those who don't know what to expect.**
- **Make it easy and convenient for members to take part in the process.**
- **Offer more than one way for them to participate—and “sell” the importance of doing so.**
- **If participation is so limited that the board fears that the agreement reached may not be representative of the membership as a whole, additional efforts to reach agreement should be made.**

The League is a grassroots organization, meaning that members make the policy. Deciding whether or not there is member agreement on a policy issue is a critical decision. Thus members must understand how and why to participate. The study and member agreement process should be explained in order to promote participation as well as to ensure confidence in the outcome. Because consensus is often intimidating to new or reticent members, be sure they understand its value. Let them know they are encouraged to engage in dialogue but not forced to voice their views.

The League believes firmly in making it easy for the public to participate in government decision making. Member participation in League internal decision making is equally important. One of the most important types of decisions Leagues make is the agreement reached on an item after study. Thus consensus and concurrence participation methods should be explained and details advertised to members. Meetings should be held in convenient places, with maps and carpools offered. Meeting times should be convenient. Ideally, there should be a daytime and an evening meeting.

Advertise all the ways members can take part, and supply dates, time, and deadlines...

- in the board-approved yearly calendar so busy people can put dates on their calendars months ahead
- in the VOTER calendar, starting at least two months ahead
- in VOTER articles
- with a post-card reminder
- via phone calls, whether they are made routinely or because of the importance of the consensus or concurrence process
- by e-mail
- on the web page



Ask members to bring educational material including consensus questions to the consensus meeting.

Send the consensus questions or concurrence statements out in advance in the VOTER so that members may be thinking about the issues. If members cannot attend a meeting they might be invited to phone, e-mail, or mail a response. Send the questions out electronically and allow them to be returned that way. Those who wish to participate but cannot attend the meeting will appreciate the opportunity.

The rule in the League—and the democratic process—is that the inactive do not hold back the active. Nonetheless, if the board judges the turnout to be so small that they are not sure the agreement reached is representative of the membership as a whole, they should choose to continue the process. Additional meetings may be held. A proposed position statement based on the consensus reached to date may be offered for concurrence at a meeting or via the VOTER, e-mail, or phone poll. A proposed concurrence statement may be issued again with reminders that participation is important. (Warning: Admonishing those who did not take part seldom makes them want to participate the next time.)

THE CONSENSUS MEETING

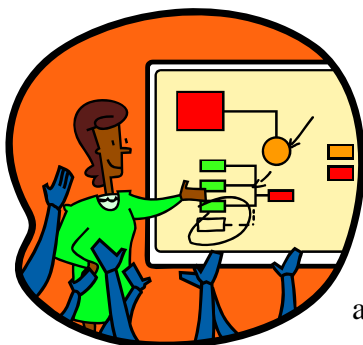
7. Create an atmosphere of trust

- **Diverse people reach agreement on contentious issues only after they have begun to trust each other.**
- **Meeting agenda, format, and setting can either promote or stifle discussion.**
- **The member agreement leadership team of discussion leader, recorder, and resource person(s) is there to facilitate the process. Team members may participate, but should not dominate.**
- **Changes in the routine way a League has conducted a study may be creative but can reduce confidence in the validity of the outcome if concerns about the new process are not addressed.**

Agreement among people with diverse views rests on a foundation of trust. Nonpartisanship, balanced and unbiased study materials and consensus questions, and respect for the grassroots all promote an atmosphere of trust both inside and outside the League. Governmental leaders respect us for “doing our homework” even when we reach positions with which they differ.

The agenda, format, and setting of the consensus meeting can promote good discussion or stifle it. Some social time at all meetings acquaints members with each other, making them more likely to speak up. Planning an agenda and facilitating discussion so there is time to consider all the questions on the table prevent issues from being neglected. A circle of chairs invites sharing of thoughts among equals whereas theater-type seating feels like the unequal student-teacher relationship.

The consensus or concurrence meeting calls for a discussion leader, also known as a facilitator. An additional person may serve as recorder, or the facilitator may choose to use a flip chart to record areas of agreement. Study committee members typically serve as resources to provide background on the issues being discussed, either through brief presentations or by answering questions. Members who take these leadership positions in the member agreement process must be as neutral as possible, careful not to dominate discussion, force their views on others, or ignore opposing views. Have extra copies of informational material at the meeting.



The Discussion Leader: This facilitator need not be an expert on the issue, but should have the same knowledge base as the membership. The facilitator keeps the group on track to move the agenda along, welcomes all viewpoints, and encourages all to participate. The facilitator looks for common threads among the ideas voiced and tests wording to see if the group thinks it represents agreement. If it does not, small modifications may make a statement agreeable to all. Posting emerging areas of agreement on a flip chart prevents repetition and serves as a group memory.

The group may wish to acknowledge lack of agreement when that occurs, while still recording the key points. When there are several opportunities to reach consensus, minority views may show up as majority views in other groups so it is a good idea to note strong minority views. Awareness of these views helps the board determine sufficient support for a specific idea. At the end of the meeting, the facilitator should review the areas of agreement for participants and tell people what happens to their input.

The Recorder should refer to the consensus questions or concurrence statement in printed materials or post them on a flip chart to make it easier for the facilitator to keep people on task. The recorder records areas of agreement as summarized by the facilitator and notes the main points made, which may be useful in pulling together a consensus statement. The recorder should send the notes to the study committee promptly.

The use of VOTER tear-offs, telephone polls, and e-mail responses means the board should consider how to ensure “one-person, one-vote.” The board should decide whether and how to validate these responses. These methods may be more suited to concurrence.

Consensus is a way to make decisions in the League. It is as binding as a vote. Voting in the League is restricted to voting members, just as it is in the democratic process. **Thus consensus is also restricted to voting members.** Many Leagues encourage non-voting members and non-members to take part in the educational phase of the study process, but the member agreement phase is for members. If VOTER tear-offs, phone polls, etc. are used to seek member agreement, the membership list should be updated first.

DETERMINING CONSENSUS

8. The Board carefully evaluates whether agreement has been reached.

- **The study committee evaluates whether agreement has been reached and drafts a position statement accordingly. The board considers and adopts the new position.**
- **The board judges whether there is substantial agreement among the participants, and that they are representative of the membership as a whole.**
- **Deciding whether there is member agreement is a subjective process carried out as objectively as possible.**
- **Once adopted by the board, the position on a local study can be used for action. The local board publishes local positions to make members aware of them. Local consensus on state and national studies is forwarded to the appropriate board, and should not be published locally until the state or national position is formulated.**

As soon as possible after responses are available, the study committee evaluates whether or not agreement has been reached and writes the proposed position statement. It reports this to the board, usually at the next meeting. The proposed position usually consists of an over-arching, goal-oriented statement followed by details that flesh it out.

When evaluating the reports, the committee should list areas of clear agreement, areas of tentative agreement, areas where members were undecided, and areas where members decided they did not have enough information to make an informed judgment. When input came from several meetings or methods, the areas of tentative agreement may generate a position when pulled together. Agreement includes both what the group supports and what they oppose. If board members participate in the consensus or concurrence activities, it will be easier for them to consider the committee's recommendations. It is common not to reach agreement on some aspects of a League study.



To see if the input came from members who are representative of the group as a whole, the committee should list the number of members that participated, and the percentage of the total membership. Leagues should check that there are no patterns that would make responses unrepresentative of the League as a whole. For example, if a League with both urban and suburban membership studied annexation and there was clear agreement to support it but most of the participants were city-dwellers, the board would have to question whether the agreement reached was representative of the League as a whole.

Consensus is not a simple majority but there are no official percentages that represent member agreement in terms of either the number of members participating or the level of support for an item.

- If 100 members participated in a concurrence on a controversial issue and 51 favored the statement, it would not be considered member agreement. So Leagues often look for 3/5, or 2/3, or 3/4 of members to favor an item before calling it member agreement.

- When there is no face-to-face group discussion of consensus questions or concurrence statements, there will be a collection of individual opinions. Thus some boards increase the level of support needed to reach a position.
- In terms of the number of members participating, historical levels of involvement need to be considered. Deciding that half the members should have participated sounds good but, if the average turnout is 20%, the League would never be able to develop new positions.

The board adopts a position covering areas where agreement has been reached. In a local study, the board then publishes this position. In a state or national study, the board sends this local input to the appropriate board but does not publish it until there is a new state or national position (to avoid confusion if the results differ). Once adopted by the board doing the study, the position can be used for action.

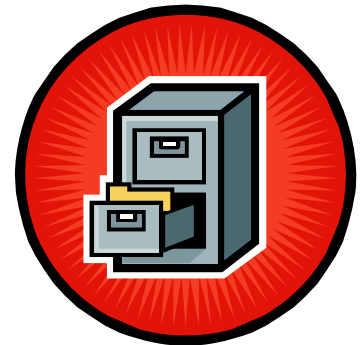
AFTER CONSENSUS IS APPROVED

9. Maintain adequate records to ensure that future members can understand the agreement that was reached.

- **Good files make it easier to interpret positions to see if action is permitted.**
- **Good files make it easier to restudy the topic when the need arises.**

Things to keep...

- the consensus questions or concurrence statement
- the meeting agenda and discussion materials
-
- the educational background materials and descriptions of events
- the response forms
- the recorder's notes
- the board-approved position statement
- VOTER articles
- publicity
- names and contact information of study committee members and discussion team leaders
- summary of research



TAKING ACTION

10. Act to bring about governmental change.

At this point, the work of the study committee is complete. The President, Program Vice-President, Action Director (or Advocacy Vice-President), take the responsibility of ensuring that the goals of the new position statement are promoted through aggressive advocacy whenever circumstances call for it.

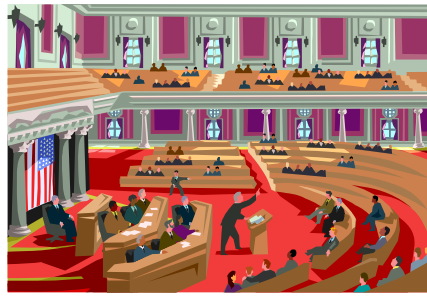
According to LWV-TX policy, “Action is our League effort to bring about governmental change based on the positions we derive through member study and consensus.” Leagues can utilize their local positions, as well as state and national positions, to effectively lobby at the local level by:

- contacting local officials, both elected and appointed,
- monitoring local boards and commissions,
- testifying before meetings, such as the city council or the school board,
- writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper,
- sponsoring a meeting to publicize a problem and offer solutions,
- and even by litigating.

Taking action generally produces positive community support for the League, but depending on the issue, it can create negative ramifications as well. Before making the final decision to act on an issue, the board should consider:

- Under what position do you wish to act? Remember that Leagues only act on a League position or principle.
- What do you wish to accomplish?
- Who is authorized to act and/or speak for you League?
- Will state or national or other local Leagues be affected by this action? If so, is authorization needed from LWV-TX, LWVUS or other local Leagues before you act?

For more information about taking action on issues that affect other levels of the organization, consult “Taking Action: Guidelines for Local Leagues” in the latest edition of the *League Directory & Handbook* (LWV-TX).



LEAGUE RESOURCES

FROM LWV-TEXAS:

Program Perspectives - Complete wording, explanations, and history of action taken for all positions held by LWV-TX. Includes brief descriptions of national positions and related LWV-TX action. Appendix includes listing of local League program topics. Revised biennially in the fall after LWV-TX Convention.

FROM LWVUS:

Impact on Issues: A Leader's Guide to National Program - A complete listing of national positions, history and action taken. Revised biennially after LWVUS Convention.

Empowering Citizens: A Guide to Influencing Public Policy - Designed to help League leaders in developing and implementing a local program that will build LWV membership, visibility, diversity, and financial security. 1996.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I:

LEAGUE PRINCIPLES

The Principles are concepts of government to which all Leagues subscribe. They are the beliefs shared by League members everywhere. Principles are the basis upon which national, state, and local program is adopted. The Principles themselves may be used to take action at any level of government. However, because they are broad statements, such action is usually taken in conjunction with current League positions. Additional information on their usage is found in *Impact on Issues*.

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 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 the development of international organizations and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

APPENDIX II:

Tips for Conducting Interviews

There are no hard and fast rules in interviewing. Much depends on the conditions of the interview and the personality of the interviewee.

The purpose of an interview may be:

- To learn facts not otherwise obtainable.
- To verify facts already obtained.
- To find out where certain materials can be obtained and to gain access to such materials.
- To elicit the interviewee's point of view and at the same time to inform him/her of the League's interest in a particular issue.

Before the interview:

- ✓ Be well informed on the subject. Have background material available to support your questions.
- ✓ Do some research on your interviewee, his/her point of view, personality, political agenda (if applicable).
- ✓ Know your purpose and stick to it.
- ✓ Plan questions carefully; they should be clear and directed at achieving your goals, but never imply an answer.
- ✓ Make an appointment in advance, identify yourself as a League member, state your purpose for the interview, and give an estimate of the time you will need.
- ✓ Confirm the interview the day before; arrive promptly; bring a colleague (two remember better than one); be friendly, appreciative, and complimentary.
- ✓ Explain again the purpose of the interview and how the information given will be used. Let the interviewee do the talking, take notes, and request fact sheets or any other materials that may relate to the interview.
- ✓ Never express an opinion or engage in an argument. Keep a tight control of the course of the interview while being polite and tactful.
- ✓ Keep track of time and end the interview when promised and with due appreciation.
- ✓ Review the material with your colleague as soon as possible after the meeting. Separate fact from opinion and write a comprehensive report. It is always a good idea to send the interviewee a copy of your report along with a thank-you note.

APPENDIX III:

Planning a General Meeting or Public Forum

A League general meeting should always be open to the public. It is an educational tool for both members and the community at large. It increases League visibility and highlights its commitment to public service.

Planning such a meeting requires several committee members under the supervision of the Program Vice-President. Some Leagues have a “facilities person” in charge of finding locations and supplying refreshments for events.

Location: A community meeting place, such as a school, library, community center, or a facility that relates to the study topic and can be toured is an appropriate location, and will probably be free of charge. The board will need to approve any meeting room expenses.

Evening meetings allow better attendance by the public. Be sure the area is well lit and that ample parking is available. Morning or lunch meetings can also be planned.

Format: Invite experts and public officials (if appropriate) as panelists, suggest the use of visual aids, if available, and *always* allow for audience participation in a question/answer segment.

Panel: A balanced panel of speakers is essential to a League forum. Choose speakers with differing points of view or expertise, and appoint an experienced League moderator to allow them to respond to one another, and to questions from the audience. Three or four panelists will make for a lively and diverse presentation. More may become confusing.

Preparation:

1. Develop a list of potential panelists (in order of preference).
2. Invite them far in advance for the date set in your calendar; confirm their acceptance as soon as possible, and supply them with background material on your study and parameters for their presentation, possibly submitting questions developed by the study committee. Request biographical data for their introduction. Ask them for audio-visual needs.
3. Reconfirm their commitment by telephone at least a week before the meeting.
4. Have one or two alternates in mind in case of a last-minute cancellation.
5. Prepare an introduction of the topic and of the panelists and moderator for either the League President or the Program Vice-President to deliver at the meeting.
6. Ensure that the Public Relations (Community Relations) Vice-President is given all the necessary information well in advance to plan publicity for the event.
7. Ask the study committee to develop a set of questions for the question/answer segment in case the audience is unresponsive. These may be asked by the committee members.
8. Thank the panelists in writing or ask your League President to do so.

Pre-meeting Set-up

1. Check out the venue for space, parking, seating, audio-visual equipment, electric plugs, podium and/or table, water for speakers, etc.
2. Prepare name tags and/or tent name cards.
3. Have paper and pens for questions.

4. Appoint someone to screen questions for moderator.
5. Invite speakers to come arrive early in order to check their audio-visual equipment.

When planning a forum, ask other organizations interested in the same topic if they would like to co-sponsor. There is strength in numbers.