



What Is Open Government, and Why Does It Matter to the Memphis-Shelby County League?

For the League of Women Voters, transparency is a top tier priority because our founders built the organization on the belief that citizens must have open access to government information for informed voting. From our earliest days, the LWV treated informed participation as a foundational, structural requirement of democracy. Our founders designed the League as a pillar of civic education, grounded in the fundamental value that voters can only fulfill their responsibilities when they have access to clear, reliable, publicly available information.

Although the word transparency was not commonly used in 1920, our mission of educating voters, providing nonpartisan information, and supporting public understanding of government has always depended on visibility, openness, and accountability. These values were embedded in our organizational culture because they make informed, active citizenship possible. In short, transparency is not just important to the LWV; it is a top tier, foundational value, a pillar of our mission, and a structural requirement for empowering voters through open access to government information for informed voting.

This commitment is also reflected in our current LWVTN policy positions. The LWVTN Transparent/Open Government position states that democratic government depends upon informed and active participation at all levels. It affirms that government bodies must protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making public records accessible. These expectations align directly with our League's century-old commitment to informed participation and civic accountability.

Our long-standing dedication to informed voting naturally extends to supporting strong, clear, and understandable open meeting and public comment policies. These policies give our communities real time access to government decision making and ensure that citizens can observe how and why public officials take action. Our founders believed that voter education and civic engagement were structural requirements of a functioning democracy, which inherently depends on open access to government information for informed voting. As an organization created to help citizens understand and influence public policy, we have always emphasized the public's right to observe governmental actions, a value rooted in our early mission to educate voters and increase understanding of public affairs.

Similarly, our early investments in voter information, civic education, and public policy understanding demonstrate that access to public records is not an optional feature but a fundamental value aligned with our nonpartisan mission. When the League established the League of Women Voters Education Fund to deepen citizen understanding of government, we reinforced the principle that citizens must be able to see, review, and analyze public information in order to participate effectively. Modern policies supporting transparent meetings, robust public comment, and strong public records access are direct descendants of our League's foundational pillars: empowering citizens, supporting informed voting, and ensuring democratic accountability.

Carrie Chapman Catt expressed the heart of what transparency means to our work when she said, "Everybody counts in applying democracy." Her words remind us that democracy only succeeds when every person has the information, access, and opportunity needed to engage meaningfully in public life. Our League carries this commitment forward today, standing firmly on the principle that open access to government information is not merely good practice, but a structural requirement for a free and functioning democracy.