



Writing Pros and Cons on Local Ballot Measures

In any voter service project, LWV provides unbiased, factual information in language that is understandable to most voters. Writing Pros and Cons on local ballot measures requires a three-step process: research, writing, and editing, to ensure that those standards are met.

Research

The best place to start research is the City Clerk or County Clerk's office. The City Attorney or County Counsel likely prepared a report on the proposed measure for the governing body to review before it voted to put the measure on the ballot. This report will explain the situation and why the measure was being considered. This is an invaluable source of information. The City Clerk would know if there was a report submitted when the measure was being considered.

Another source of information is the analysis of a ballot measure that appears in the voter guide, or sample ballot. The County Counsel or District Attorney writes an impartial analysis of a ballot measure that will appear in the Sample Ballot/Voter Guide. Contact the City Clerk's office (or the County Clerk's office) to obtain the information that will appear in the sample ballot pamphlet. The County Registrar of Voters office may also have this information. The statements usually include summaries of the text, the fiscal impact, the arguments on both sides, the text of the measure, and the signers of the arguments.

Each city and county is different, so check with the city or county to find out what information is available from whom and when it is available. Other possible sources of information are the City or County Counsel and the City or County Auditor.

Writing

Below is a template and instructions. It is adapted from that which is used by the Pros and Cons writing and editing team. Advice on how to write the sections appears beneath the headings.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PROS & CONS

Length Limit: about **525 words**, including the section headers. Simple propositions should be below the word limit.

Formatting: Use the template provided, using Arial, 12 pt.

Following is a list of instructions on how to fill in the sections of the template. Most of the information needed to write these sections is found from official sources.

Title: Use the official title.

The Question: This should be written as a single question, not a series of questions. It should set up the issue for the voter and contain some basic information about the ballot measure.

Set the question up so that the voter can see the substance, but not every little detail, of the measure. Set the question up so that if a voter concludes that the answer to the question is yes, then the voter will vote yes on the ballot measure.

The question will probably start with: "Should the city (county)..." Provide some basic information such as "require ____" or "increase ____"

For examples of the way questions are written, consult old copies of the Pros and Cons on statewide ballot measures. They are found on cavotes.org.

The Situation: Explain the current state of the law or procedure. Because ballot measures seek to change something, it is important that voters understand the current state of affairs. This is usually in one paragraph, unless there are disparate aspects to the ballot measure.

The Proposal: Summarize the main provisions of the proposition. Use bullet points if it aids comprehension, such as when there are provisions on distinct topics.

Fiscal Effect: Shorten and clarify the information in the source information.

Supporters Say / Opponents Say: List two or three arguments on either side by extracting material from official arguments. You do not have to use the exact language they use. Often you can combine arguments and simplify the language.

Use objective arguments. Avoid inflammatory arguments. Always avoid arguments that falsely portray the measure.

To ensure that the overall treatment of the proposition is perceived as fair and objective, the sets of arguments pro and con should be balanced in strength and length: about the same amount of space is taken for the pro arguments as for the con arguments; try to avoid having a stronger set of arguments on one side. The arguments are listed in bullet points, rather than being numbered, to avoid suggesting one argument is more

important than another.

Note: if there is no official opponent, it can be hard to fill out the “Opponents Say” section. Look for credible, objective information. Perhaps there is testimony before the governing body from opponents. If you have an Observer Corps or your advocacy people are following the issue, check with them to see if they are aware of sources of information.

If there are no arguments in support of, or opposed to, the measures in the official analysis you can state:

No argument supporting/opposing Measure/Proposition ____ was submitted.

Supporters / Opponents: Provide a single name and website address for a major supporter, and a major opponent. This can be a website maintained by the supporter or opponent. It can be an email, but only use in the absence of a website.

Editing

Establish an editing process, both to monitor the accuracy of the Pros & Cons, as well as the length, quality, and appropriateness in language for the intended audience. The writer of the initial draft should not also be an editor. Involve others in the editing process to ensure that the Pros and Cons are not biased in favor of one side or the other.

If you have the capacity to do so, research and write additional background information for your speakers. It will be an In Depth for the local propositions.