

THE SOUTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN 2023

As this is written, May 29th, the 2023 session of the South Carolina General Assembly is stumbling towards a close. Although we are past the last day of the regular session, there is no *sine die* resolution establishing a firm schedule for wrapping up the budget or considering the Governor’s vetoes. The Senate and House could not agree on a replacement for Comptroller Richard Eckstrom and the solution was to forego the usual *sine die* resolution to allow the Governor to appoint someone, which is possible only when the legislature is not in session. So this year the General Assembly comes back at the Governor’s call. This somehow encapsulates much of the dysfunction of this session.

This was a contentious year, featuring a multi-pronged effort to stop our changing culture in its tracks and even reverse it. One older gentleman testified in subcommittee that he didn’t see why anyone would object to reinstating the values of American society that he loved in the 1950s. Others of us with a clear memory of that period understand why those of us who are female, LGBTQ+, Black, Hispanic, disabled, or members of religious minorities might find this prospect horrifying.

I begin with the worst news. S.474, a six-week abortion ban with limited exceptions that is very nearly a full ban, has passed and has been signed by the Governor. We deeply appreciate those (including most of the Democratic Caucus) who valiantly filibustered the bill in the

House with hundreds of amendments. Many of those changes would have significantly improved the lives of actual living breathing children in this state but all were rejected by the majority.

When the bill was sent back from the House, the principled opposition of the women of the Senate was deeply impressive and yet heart-breaking as too many of their male colleagues supported the ban based explicitly on their religious beliefs, their (often grotesquely inadequate) understanding of reproductive biology, and their political self-interest. We owe a debt of gratitude for the courage, intelligence, and determination of senators Sandy Senn, Margie Bright Matthews, Katrina Shealy, Mia McLeod, and Penry Gustafson, who from their different perspectives opposed the bill. Nevertheless, S.474 passed with provisions negotiated between House and Senate leadership in a backroom deal. Now, Planned Parenthood South Atlantic, the Greenville Women’s Clinic, and several doctors have filed suit to stop implementation, and as of this date, an injunction has been issued pending the state Supreme Court taking up the issue. Supporters of the ban are hoping that some cosmetic changes in the language of the bill and a change in court membership will allow them to use the coercive power of government to invade our privacy and compel all of us to live by their beliefs.

In another attempt to insert intrusive government into personal medical decisions, S.627 would prohibit

treatment for gender dysphoria in the critical adolescent years, over substantial opposition from the medical community and the public. This issue is surrounded by much misunderstanding. Treatment provided to prepubescent children is counseling and support, as well as the option to transition socially through clothing and adopting a name reflecting their preferred gender. After puberty begins, teens then have the option of reversible hormonal puberty blockers to allow more time before making permanent decisions. Relevant medical associations strongly support these measures. However, these bills remain active.

Continued on page 3

Highlights

- President’s Message*.....2
- Public Education at a Tipping Point*.....4
- Curriculum Censorship Harms, Not Helps, Students*...5
- Know Your State Now Available*5
- 2023 State Convention*6
- Sarah Leverette Award*.....7
- LWVSC and LWVSC Action: What’s the Difference?*7

Antidotes to Toxic Polarization in American Politics

Partisan polarization and the systemic changes that could mitigate it were the topics of a recent panel discussion at Coastal Carolina University in which I participated. When asked how I would characterize the current political landscape, I thought of former President Jimmy Carter’s descriptor: “toxic polarization.”

What are the drivers of polarization?

Polarization is driven by a rise in identity politics in which voters associate themselves with a social, religious, racial, or other “tribe.” Tribalism has led to hostility toward and a desire to defeat the people who are not on their team. When their party or their candidate loses, their tribe loses. The rise in identity politics is coincident with the increasingly pluralistic nature of American society which causes discomfort among many in the majority and engenders fear of minority groups.

Polarization is also exacerbated by 24-hour cable news, the Internet, social media, and talk radio. An increasing number of media outlets cater to their audiences and are willing to spread misinformation in order to gain profits. Listeners, in turn, pick their news sources to align with their political beliefs and become further entrenched in their silos. Partisan gerrymandering has also warped the political landscape by creating political districts that ensure the domination of the political party in power.

All these factors combine to create a distrust of electoral and political systems. On one end of the spectrum this distrust leads to voters’ malaise and, as a result, low participation in elections. On the other end of the spectrum, distrust leads to the justification of violence against the government.

What can we do to improve our current political system?

1. Continue election reforms at every level of government that encourage

- participation and enhance representation for all voters (i.e. longer early voting periods; no-excuse absentee voting, online application and return of absentee ballots, notice and cure, more early voting locations, more money for county election offices).
- 2. Eliminate straight ticket voting in general elections** to encourage more split ticket voting. Voters should consider individual candidates, not just party labels.
- 3. Maintain an open primary system.** In South Carolina and other one-party states, general elections are frequently won in the primaries when turnout is low and where more extreme candidates tend to win. Open primaries not only help mitigate polarization, but they also capture the voices of independent voters, who are on the rise in many states.
- 4. Build support for ranked choice voting (i.e. instant run-off elections).** Ranked choice voting would eliminate expensive, time-consuming re-runs, increase civility, lessen polarization, and increase the election of candidates more reflective of voters as a whole. Successful examples exist in Alaska, Maine, and New York City. Building support for non-threatening ranked choice voting in nonpartisan local elections in South Carolina would allow our state legislators to see the benefits of adoption at the state level.
- 5. Reform redistricting.** Although LWVSC wasn’t successful in our efforts to establish an independent redistricting commission before the 2020 census, efforts need to continue to reform the redistricting process before the 2030 census. When the partisan legislature controls the process, incumbents are ensured re-election and districts with the widest partisan leans tend to produce the



most extreme legislators. And more importantly, the people’s voices are not heard.

6. Abolish the Electoral College. This method of electing a president, codified in our Constitution, no longer generates a winner who reflects the will of the voters. Although its elimination would require a constitutional amendment, it is the “moonshot” goal of the League of Women Voters. Until such an amendment is adopted, LWV supports states’ participation in the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, whereby states agree to cast all of their electoral votes in favor of the candidate who wins the popular vote.

How can these changes be effected? The League of Women Voters supports these reforms under its umbrella campaign to Make Democracy Work. Sadly, most elected officials are interested in preserving their power. Therefore, it will be up to us—the voters—to elect persons more interested in protecting democracy than in protecting themselves.

—Nancy Williams, LWVSC President

**From her panel remarks on “Fighting Major Party Polarization: Can a Different Approach Improve American Politics?” at Coastal Carolina University on March 23, 2023.*

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Continued from page 1

Unsurprisingly, guns are another issue that was prominent this year. H.3594, called “Constitutional carry,” has advanced from the House to the Senate. This would allow carrying concealed weapons without a permit or training. It is opposed by much of law enforcement as well as other sensible citizens. The name of this bill is derived from what conservative SCOTUS Chief Justice Warren Burger described as “one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word fraud, on the American public by special interests.”

Another bill, S.440, would allow any citizen of South Carolina 18 years old or older to carry and use any firearm used by the U.S. military in war—but without the strict controls on access to deadly weapons that the military demands of even its most highly trained soldiers. While Joint Base Andrews was recently shut down for hours following a report of a single individual with an unauthorized weapon, we as civilians are supposed to welcome deadly semi-automatic weapons carried by untrained and unsupervised individuals in our public spaces.

Education also has been the focus of yet more efforts that would attempt to

take us back to a disturbing past, through diversion of public funds to private schools and censorship of schools and libraries. League Education Specialist Janelle Rivers and intern Jessica Baxter discuss this elsewhere in this issue.

As always, the League’s central issue is elections and voting, but there was less activity in this area in 2023 following passage of major changes in 2022. Fortunately, H.3734, standardizing municipal election conduct and dates, has passed the House and been sent to the Senate. This measure is important and we hope that it will pass. S.406, a bill that would provide badly needed time for election workers to tally early voting ballots, has stalled in the House, reportedly due to “Freedom Caucus” plans to introduce a litany of amendments.

Two far less desirable bills have not yet passed. H.3823 would limit to 5 the number of ballots a single person can witness, with a possible amendment for group living situations to 20. This measure would place a very substantial administrative burden on county election workers, even if amended to accommodate the needs of voters in group homes. H.3695 would close primaries by party, potentially disenfranchising many voters of both major parties in our heavily gerrymandered government.

What else has not progressed? H.3014, the Clementa Pinckney Hate Crimes Act, has passed the House and Senate committees but has not been debated on the Senate floor due to opposition from some Senate leadership. We remain one of only two states without a bill enhancing penalties for those committing violent crimes based on hatred of specified groups who have been targeted historically. Given South Carolina’s history, this is especially sad and yet unsurprising.

We have not discussed all bills that the League has addressed in 2023 in this article. For that, see Advocacy at www.lwvsc.org, where we post a list of bills that we are following, our full testimony to legislative subcommittees, and our Making Democracy Work Updates on central issues. The status of any bill can be checked at www.scstatehouse.gov.

This is the first year of our two-year cycle, so those bills that have not passed may become active again in January, or at the call of the Governor before then. The League will continue to advocate for the right of every citizen to a meaningful voice in how we are governed and for a society that welcomes and respects the rights of all of its people. Each of us must take an active part in this if we are to succeed.

—Lynn S. Teague, LWVSC Vice President, Issues & Advocacy



Imagine the feeling of registering to vote right after being sworn in as a US citizen! That was the experience of 20 new citizens as they left their Naturalization Ceremony. LWV Charleston was there at the US Immigration office, West Ashley, to make it possible.



Hanaa Khan, a sophomore at Greenville Tech Charter High School, took the information LWV Greenville provided and gave a great presentation about voting to 80 seniors, 20 of whom registered on the spot. Bravo!

PUBLIC EDUCATION AT A TIPPING POINT

Why do we need publicly funded schools?

- to provide training for low-wage workers
- for students whose parents can't afford private school tuition
- for students who are refused admission to private schools
- for the benefit of the social order
- other _____ (Explain your answer.)

What is the goal of public education?

- to teach the only the basics of reading, writing and mathematics
- to provide a customized parent-approved learning environment
- to respond to societal problems
- to prepare young people to be responsible citizens
- other _____ (Explain your answer.)

How did your beliefs about public education and the 2023 actions of your state representatives align?

It's been decided: **SC will spend public money for private schools next year.** After years of hard-fought battles, South Carolina's privatizers have finally convinced lawmakers to pass one program to provide publicly funded \$6,000 annual scholarships for K-12 students whose parents prefer to enroll them in private or religious schools. Beginning in fall 2024, the Education Scholarship Account program is destined to expand so that by fall 2026, children from a family of four with an annual income of up to \$120,000 will be eligible for publicly funded scholarships. Beyond that, some of our lawmakers are working hard to promote an additional program that would provide even more money for private schools through a different process that would be funded through tax credits.

How would your legislators answer the question of why, or possibly even whether, we need publicly funded schools that are

open to everyone? What do your friends and neighbors think? Voters in South Carolina need to decide how much they value free public education and whether they want high-quality public schools for all the future citizens of this state.

Who will control curriculum and library resources?

The other continuing controversy in public education in the past two years has been the question of which voices in the community are going to decide the range and focus of the public-school curriculum. There is a national trend among some groups to push for censoring curriculum, banning books, and limiting discussion of controversial issues. How many parents will choose to be engaged? Will people who don't have children in public school care enough to be involved? Again, it will be up to the voters of South Carolina to decide whether they care enough to pay attention to what is happening in local school board elections, study the issues, and take their concerns to the ballot box.

For at least two full years, some of our lawmakers have promoted bills that seek to limit thought and discussion to non-controversial topics. These legislators and their supporters would insist that schools avoid the difficult problems of our shared history, especially around issues related to race and gender. They would like to create over-simplified legal remedies for problems that are better handled by professional educators who have context-specific facts. Although the Senate version of this year's "Transparency and Integrity Act" was much less offensive than the House version, any bill of this type is problematic because this kind of legislation is part of a national trend to censor public school curriculum. The danger is that those who promote censorship and curriculum restriction are likely to push a nationwide agenda that goes beyond what might be enacted by statute.

What happens next?

Meanwhile, public education is at a tipping point. Years of popular criticism and continuing failure to offer adequate salaries, support, or respect for educators have led to a mass exodus of teachers and administrators.

The cumulative effect has been to create a critical shortage of well-trained educators. Although quality candidates for teacher preparation programs are more needed than ever, education has become less and less attractive as a career option for bright young people. We cannot expect today's top graduates to sacrifice personal goals and family time to work in a setting where their professional training is not respected and where they will earn less than peers who choose other professions with similar requirements.

The voices that are most notably absent are those of citizens who could demand support for a strong system of public schools. Bold changes will be needed to remedy the cumulative problems caused by years of failure to recognize the importance of providing support of all kinds for a strong system of free public schools. We can hope to see strong, supportive recommendations in the report of Gov. McMaster's Teacher Task Force, which had been scheduled for release in early May, but has been delayed without explanation.

The public may not recognize the full extent of the threat to public schools, but we can be grateful to League members around South Carolina who are stepping in to help. Local League members are recognizing the need for advocacy and speaking up as concerned citizens to tell local and state officials that they value and support public education.

The future and viability of public education are being tested in South Carolina. Answers and actions matter. You can find legislators' voting records at scstatehouse.gov.

—Janelle Rivers, Ph.D., LWVSC Education Advocacy Specialist/Lobbyist

Curriculum Censorship Harms, Not Helps, Students

In April, LWVSC intern and USC graduate student Jessica Baxter testified before the Senate Education Committee regarding H.3728, a bill that would ban discussions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and some aspects of American history. Her compelling comments illustrate why the League must continue to strongly oppose censorship efforts.

My name is Jessica Baxter. I am a graduate student at USC who is pursuing a dual masters in social work and public administration and just want to share my perspective on why H. 3728 needs to be rejected.

I've lived in Columbia, SC since I was 7 years old and attended school in Richland School District 2 for most of my primary and secondary years of education. Over the years, I was lucky to have English teachers who were invested in having a diverse range of literary works to cultivate conversations on issues like racism, classism, and sexism. It really challenged me at a young age to look beyond my own perspective and think about societal problems that not only impacted other people, but myself as well. With that being said, there is a reason why I said I was lucky to have those teachers because when I finally went off to college as an undergrad, I saw firsthand the position some of my college peers were in due to them NOT being so lucky.

For my undergrad years, I attended Columbia College here in Columbia and my freshman year of college was in 2015. In that year alone, the Confederate flag came down at the State House, the Charleston 9 mass shooting took place, the former deputy at my high school (Spring Valley High School) made national headlines for flipping a Black student out of a desk, and SC got hit with historic flooding. So much happened that year and when it was time to have actual conversations on real life issues that were in close proximity to the campus community, it was really obvious that some students did not have the tools to have meaningful conversation on how our community could cope and move forward towards positive change. They were not used to having hard conversations about societal issues like racism and poverty and it really showed. It was very disappointing considering the number of students going into career fields that involve them dealing with marginalized communities that are heavily impacted by these same issues and more.

College should not be the first place that people learn about oppression and how to communicate effectively in hard conversations. Critical thinking and introspection are skills that kids should be developing over time so when they achieve adulthood, they don't feel bombarded by new information and challenges that comes with an evolving society. Censoring education leaves our youth at a disservice by not allowing them the opportunity to think beyond themselves and to consider what the world is like for those who may be different from them and be innovative towards solving societal problems. Please invest in the protection of our youth's educational experience.

—Jessica Baxter
Graduate Student, University of South Carolina

New! Know Your State: South Carolina Government, 2023 Edition

The 6th edition of *Know Your State: South Carolina Government* is now available on Amazon for \$15. Order your personal copy of this valuable resource, updated with voting and legislative changes, and more! ([http://bit.ly/ KnowYourStateSC](http://bit.ly/KnowYourStateSC))

Citizen education and connecting citizens to the political process are roles the League was created to fulfill and remain our greatest strength. LWVSC has published the 6th edition of *Know Your State: South Carolina Government* as a guide to understanding how government works in our state and as a tool for effective citizen advocacy. First published in 1972, this comprehensive paperback provides information on the SC constitution and its history; the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of SC government; education, finance, and taxation; and local government and home rule.



The new edition was the product of the efforts of many people. General editor was Holley H. Ulbrich, Professor Emerita of Economics, Clemson University, and a past LWVSC co-president. League leaders who contributed their expertise and experience in state government to this publication by writing or reviewing one or more sections include JoAnne Day, Janelle Rivers, Lynn Teague, and Catherine Watt. Former state legislator and retired Circuit Judge Gary Clary revised the judicial chapter. Thanks, too, to Anita T. Baker, Connie Deerin, Janelle Rivers, and Nancy Williams for serving as editors in the publication process.

Connect with us!





2023 STATE CONVENTION DEMOCRACY: OUR MISSION. OUR PASSION.

Over seventy delegates, observers, and guests from fourteen local Leagues gathered in Columbia for LWVSC's biennial convention on April 29 and 30. A fast-paced program of eleven speakers addressed the intersectionality of democracy with health care, education, politics, gender, and justice.

Attendees were treated to a talk from renowned civil rights attorney Armand Derfner, a live podcast of *Bourbon in the Back Room*, and a stirring call to action from USC political scientist Kirk Randazzo among other speakers.

Controversy-free business sessions saw the election of the slate of officers and directors and the unanimous adoption of

bylaws changes, the 2023-25 budget, and the biennial program and action agenda.

Attendees mingled with one another during free time and during Friday and Saturday evening social events. In a reception prior to Saturday's banquet, members and their guests were entertained by League member and singer Marguerite Young. Banquet speaker LWVUS Vice President Sania Irwin spoke of the League's century of accomplishments and current challenges as LWV frames its future for the next one hundred years. Highlights of the evening were the presentation of membership growth awards to the Columbia Area and Sumter County Leagues, a diversity, equity, and

inclusion award to LWV of Greenville County, and the first inaugural Sarah Leverette Award to Lynn S. Teague.

Newly re-elected President Nancy Williams said she was leaving the convention energized and inspired. Despite the many challenges facing our state and its democratic institutions, the League and its members continue to be beacons of light in South Carolina.

The convention opened on Saturday with thanks offered to the Columbia host League and closed on Sunday with an invitation from representatives from Greenville, Spartanburg, Oconee and Pickens, and Anderson to come to Greenville for an Upstate convention in 2025.

Sarah Leverette Award Honors Lynn S. Teague

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina is pleased to announce the presentation of our inaugural 2023 Sarah Leverette Award to Lynn S. Teague at our biennial convention, April 29.

Late League member Sarah Leverette was one of the first women admitted to the South Carolina Bar, a professor at USC, and its law librarian for twenty-five years. She was widely admired for her legal acumen and her passion for good government issues.

Sarah also had a long and special relationship with the state League for over 65 years. When the legislature was in session, she could be found lobbying for the many causes she held dear. Former lawmaker and state Attorney General Travis Medlock remembered that "Sarah worked with the League of Women Voters and told us what to do on serious policy matters—and we did it. And it turned out well."

Sarah was also a mentor to Lynn Teague who said, "She was a phenomenal help to me when I first started representing the League at the State House." That was over ten years ago.

Lynn Teague, whose family roots go deep in SC, has ably represented the League of Women Voters on a host of what

she calls "good government" and other issues. She has worked tirelessly, putting in 50 or 60 hours a week when our legislature is in session. She is personally known to most of our legislators, who respect her, even when they disagree with her. She delivers cogent testimony, has developed a network of over 30 partner organizations, and attracts over 100 League members to her regular Legislative Updates. She uses her Southern charm as well as her political acumen to enlist allies in the fights the League considers most dear. We didn't win all the battles, but Lynn was instrumental in obtaining notice and cure for absentee ballots in 2020 and in adding two weeks of early voting in 2022.

When reporters have questions on an election, ethics, redistricting, or other government-related bills, they call Lynn. When the NAACP racial gerrymandering suit was heard by a 3-judge panel last year, Lynn was called upon to testify, and the suit was won—at least for the time being.

Like her mentor Sarah Leverette, whom she works to emulate, Lynn is a widely admired, serious policy analyst, an effective lobbyist—and a priceless asset to our League.

LWVSC and LWVSC Action: What's the Difference?

At our April convention we officially launched LWVSC Action, our new 501(c)(4) organization. Like LWVSC, our 501(c)(3) organization, both are nonprofit organizations but only donations to 501(c)(3) organizations are tax-deductible. Whereas a maximum of 20 percent of annual revenue of LWVSC may be used for direct lobbying, lobbying expenses incurred by LWVSC Action are unlimited. In launching LWVSC Action, our board is planning for the time when it will need to hire a part-time lobbyist to succeed our volunteer lobbyist. Our goal in the short term is to build the LWVSC coffers so that we have enough money to cover two years of operating expenses.

At the same time, we continue to solicit funds to support LWVSC, which is only partly supported by membership dues. LWVSC supports our grassroots advocacy and education efforts, including such things as print and electronic communications, media campaigns, VOTE411, state meetings, local League support, and office management. In the next two years, over 60 percent of LWVSC revenue will need to come from voluntary contributions.

In short, we need to generously support both organizations. At present, LWVSC is short of its annual budgeted donations. I thank those of you who have already contributed financially to its support. If you have yet to make a donation, I ask that you consider doing so before our fiscal year ends on June 30.

—Nancy Williams, LWVSC President



All work and no play? No way! Local League spring gatherings mean time for League business—and fun.



The LWV Spartanburg voter services team was well-represented at Broome High School Career Day—one League registration event of many this spring.

Post Office Box 8453
Columbia, SC 29202

SC VOTER

Spring/Summer 2023 • Volume 74 Issue 2

Established in 1920, the League of Women Voters of South Carolina is a nonpartisan, political organization that encourages people to play an informed and active role in government. At the local, state, and national levels, the League works to influence public policy through education and advocacy. League membership is open to any person who subscribes to the purposes and policy of the League. All members receive the *SC Voter*, email communications and news from their local League.

Prefer a digital newsletter only? Email us.

President: Nancy Williams

Editor: Mary Agnes Garman

Published by: *The League of Women
Voters of South Carolina*
PO Box 8453
Columbia, SC 29202

Website: lwvsc.org
league@lwvsc.org



Donate online:
lwvsc.org

Mail:
LWVSC
PO Box 8453
Columbia, SC 29202



The League of Women Voters of South Carolina is proud to be nonpartisan, neither supporting nor opposing candidates or political parties at any level of government, but always working on vital issues of concern to members and the public.

You can count on the League to protect the pillars of democracy—including voter rights, an independent judiciary, and public education—through our education and advocacy programs.

We need to count on you and your continued investment in our work. Every gift benefits our statewide efforts. Donate today!