

The 2024 General Assembly Session:

NOT ENTIRELY IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

The 2024 General Assembly ended its regular session on May 9, Sine Die, as required by law. This was the second year of the two-year cycle, so bills that have not passed both houses have died, permanently. Some of the bills that the League has followed have been decided; others await resolving differences between House and Senate versions.

As always, testimony on bills is posted at www.lwwsc.org under legislative advocacy. However, in brief outline:

- The League supported reform of municipal elections, H.3734, for greater consistency in the election process. It failed on the last day with a Senate objection when it was too late to address concerns.
- H.4561, a useful bill that would have allowed deduction of caregiver expenses from campaign accounts, expanding the pool of potential candidates for office, passed the House but died in the Senate.
- S.440, a bill that would have made all adult South Carolinians members of an unorganized militia, died—as it should have. Many of us would have been very reluctant to respond to a general mobilization by the Governor, as provided in that bill.
- H.4624 passed, very sadly. This bill prohibits gender-affirming care for minors under 18, contrary to nationally accepted medical standards of care.
- Finally, on a much more positive note, H.3553 passed, ending the sales tax on period products.

However, it isn't over for some of the bills that we've been working on. Some bills were passed by both houses but in different versions. In those cases, a conference committee will attempt to agree on a common version to be adopted during the extended session authorized by the Sine Die resolution. One of these bills, S.1046, addresses reform of the process for choosing our judges. This is integrally related to the core constitutional issue of judicial independence. Both House and Senate versions of this bill fall short of what we had hoped for, but it is very likely that the final bill will represent significant improvements in the process, including term limits for members of the body that makes initial determinations of qualifications and a greater number of candidates provided to the full General Assembly for consideration.

H.5118 is an ambitious energy bill that originated in the House, a utility company wish list of specific projects and regulatory rollbacks. Fortunately, the Senate has instead proposed a resolution indicating willingness to study the issue. A conference committee has been appointed, but it is uncertain whether that committee will move forward and reach agreement.

Data centers emerged as a driving force in energy issues during the debates, and each house recognized that in amendments to H.5118 and H.4087. Artificial intelligence and cybercurrency mining are putting nearly impossible demands on energy (and water) nationally and specifically in South Carolina. It is likely that the prohibition on data center

incentives by local governments in H.4087 will survive the conference process.

Other articles in this issue address the important education and medical issues that lobbyists Janelle Rivers and Teresa Arnold are working on.

This has been overall one of the most contentious and difficult sessions in memory. However, we have some wins to celebrate, especially progress on judicial selection and control of data center expansion, while we continue to deal with the compelling issues around South Carolina's need for expanded energy that does not harm ratepayers, our environment, and the general well-being of the people of our state.

—Lynn S. Teague,

LWVSC Vice President, Issues & Advocacy

Highlights

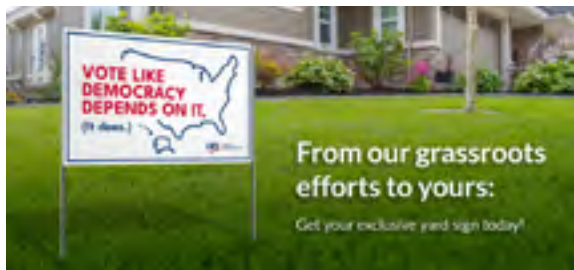
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Getting Ready for Elections

“Vote as If Democracy Depends on It (It Does)” are the words emblazoned on a League of Women Voters yard sign that needs to be displayed across America.

Indeed, at election time, voters cast their votes for the kind of town, county, state, and country they want to live in. That’s what democracy is all about—weighing in on the issues we care about, and the candidates who support them, to ensure that our government reflects the will of the people.

Sadly, many citizens sit out elections. Primaries have particularly low participation. In the 2022 primaries, only 16.9% of South Carolina voters turned out, a dismaying statistic since primaries are tantamount to the general election in a state dominated by one political party. In the presidential election of 2020, 72% of voters in South Carolina participated. Although turnout was much higher than in the primaries, 28% of voters still chose to stay home.



As we know, the 2024 election will be a very consequential one, but not just because we’ll elect a president. We’ll also be electing all of our state representatives, all of our US Congresspeople, some state senators, and a myriad of municipal, county, and school board officials. In close local races, one vote can decide a race. Clearly, voting matters.

As organizations whose mission is to empower voters and defend democracy, the state and local Leagues are hard at work in this election season, which began with the June primaries and which goes into higher gear this fall.

What We’ve Been Doing

Educating Voters

Eleven of our fifteen local Leagues have been covering hundreds of local and regional races via VOTE411, the League’s

online guide to candidates and all things election-related. Many are hosting candidate forums and meet-and-greets. Our Georgetown and Greenville Leagues created videos aimed at younger voters to promote registration and to get out the vote. To bolster local efforts to promote VOTE411, LWVSC launched a digital marketing campaign, reaching hundreds of thousands of voters across the state in the weeks leading up to the primaries.

Protecting People-Powered Fair Elections

We’ve also been fighting gerrymandering in the courts. The LWVSC filed an amicus brief in the Alexander v. SC NAACP racial gerrymandering case on which the Supreme Court of the United States ruled recently. The Court’s delay in hearing the case and its ultimate, disappointing decision ensure that the 1st Congressional

District’s lines remain as drawn for this election year as well as into 2030. Despite this major disappointment, the LWVSC is continuing to fight to protect the fair representation of all of our state’s citizens and is considering litigation in South Carolina to protect voters’ rights.

In addition, the LWVSC is part of the Election Protection Coalition working with partner organizations to identify any disturbances or irregularities during early voting and on Election Day that would potentially violate one’s right to vote.

Because of the likelihood of misinformation and possible threats to elections, the League of Women Voters of the US (LWV) has formed its own Election Task Force, which has been identifying various scenarios that would require proactive education as well as reactive responses.

What Individuals Can Do

- Register voters—Sign up with your local League to work at local events.
- Refer your friends and family members to VOTE411 for election information.



- Pressure local candidates who have yet to participate in VOTE411 to do so.
- Write personal letters to the editor discounting election misinformation.
- “Like” and share LWVSC election-related posts on Facebook and Instagram.
- Download League in Action and text election reminders to your personal network.
- Volunteer as a poll worker or poll monitor – go to powerthepolls.org/lwv.
- Purchase and display LWV’s yard sign—only \$24! Go to www.lwv.org.
- Work for and donate to candidates of your choice. (If you’re a board member, check your local nonpartisanship policy to understand limits.)

What We Still Need to Do

The LWVSC is planning to contract with a digital marketing firm which will target and reach out to more than 500,000 non-voting households across the state with unregistered and non-voting women members to get them to register to vote, to visit VOTE411 for candidate information, and—most important—to vote in the November general election. We have mounted a campaign to raise \$15,000 to launch this campaign and need everyone’s help to meet our goal! Go to www.lwvsc.org to donate. If you have already made a donation, thank you!

It will take all of us, working together, to ensure that democracy prevails in this election.

— Nancy Williams, LWVSC President

THREATS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION CONTINUE

The League’s main thrust in public education this session was defending public schools from threats that are related to a national movement for privatizing K-12 education. The threats fall into two main categories—one financial and the other cultural.

Thinly Disguised Voucher Threats

The main financial threat was an attempt to remove restrictions and quickly expand the yet-to-be-implemented Education Scholarship Trust Fund program, which is a work-around for giving out vouchers to pay for private school tuition. Education Scholarship Trust Fund programs are designed to redirect state resources to funnel even more public money to private providers for a variety of education-related expenses despite the state’s constitutional prohibition against spending state funds for direct aid to private K-12 schools. To that end, H.5164 sailed through the House in near-record time, but the Senate exercised caution, choosing to wait until next session to consider any plans to expand this untried program that could have tremendous financial consequences for the state.

League members should watch for a decision from the South Carolina Supreme Court on *Eidson v. South Carolina Department of Education*, a lawsuit filed in October 2023 by six public school parents, the South Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, and the South Carolina Education Association (South Carolina Education Association, 2023). The lawsuit claims that the program violates at least four provisions of the South Carolina Constitution.

Culture-War Threats

In the culture-war category, the threats to public education include various schemes to limit student access to information and undermine respect for teachers. In 2023, the first year of the current two-year session, the House and Senate passed different versions of H.3728, known as the

Transparency and Integrity in Education Act, which restricts materials and topics, mostly related to either gender identity or racial issues, that can be considered in public school classrooms. Of particular concern were provisions that required three days of public notice before teachers could introduce any supplementary materials, and the broadly defined possibilities for parents to file lawsuits against school districts. The conference committee did not begin meeting to reconcile differences until May 2024. When the General Assembly returns after Sine Die, the conference committee will continue to work on a new merged version of the bill, which requires free-conference powers. Obtaining that authorization requires a two-thirds vote of the full chamber in both houses. If the current bill dies, League members can expect controversial censorship and curriculum restriction issues related to race and gender identity to resurface in January 2025.

Another culture-war bill that the League opposed was H.4374, which died in committee. That bill proposed a drastic restructuring that would have constrained the entire Social Studies content standards development process.

The final piece of unfinished business after Sine Die is H.5438, a joint resolution

recommending the regulations approved by the State Board of Education to establish a “Uniform Procedure for Selection and Reconsideration of Instructional Materials.” The definition of prohibited materials is broader than the League would wish. Debate on the bill was adjourned before Sine Die. Interpreting the rule on starting the clock for automatic approval of regulations is complicated. General consensus is that approval of this regulation is still pending until at least June 25.

Teacher Shortage Crisis

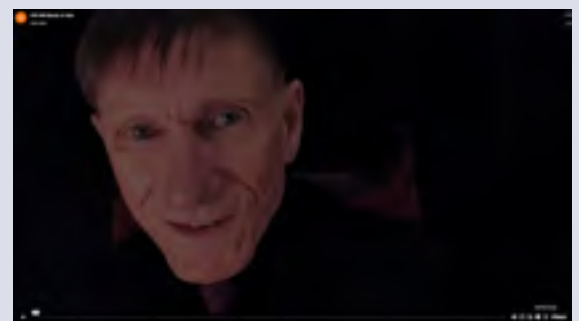
The LWVSC policy position advocates for a public school system that is effective, efficient, equitable, inclusive, fully funded, and accountable. Consequently, the League has not advocated for specific details in the budget. Raising the starting salary for teachers from \$42,500 to \$47,000 is probably the best increase we could hope to see in a single year. Teacher vacancies are reaching a crisis level, so the salary increase may help with recruitment; nevertheless, lack of public respect and the need for more supportive working environments are obstacles to attracting and retaining highly qualified candidates. Unfortunately, those needs were not priorities for the majority of our lawmakers in the 2023-24 session.

—Janelle Rivers, LWVSC Education Advocacy Specialist

South Carolina Education Association. (2023, October 26). *Press Release*. Retrieved May 2024, from The S.C.E.A.: <https://www.thescsa.org/about-the-scea/media-cent>

Stars Come to Georgetown

With funding from an LWVSC grant, LWV of Georgetown County created a video to educate voters and to encourage their participation in elections. Showcased in the video were Gullah celebrity Ron Daise and



Hollywood actor Bill Oberst, Jr. Oberst, known for his portrayal of villains, leaned into the camera and told viewers, “Vote!”

2024 Council

BUILDING OUR POWER

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina (LWVSC) held its 2024 Council on Saturday, May 4, 2024 at the Beltline Campus of Midlands Technical College in Columbia, South Carolina. More than 60 participants from 15 of the 16 state Leagues and Member-at-Large Units were welcomed by Nancy Williams, LWVSC Board President. Reflecting LWVSC's strategic emphasis, this year's theme was "Building Our Power." Several speakers addressed the day-long gathering, including an opening panel entitled "AI, Technology, Elections, and Democracy" led by LWVSC's Election Technology Director Matt Saltzman, Ph.D., who hosted Biplav Srivastava, Ph.D., University of South Carolina Artificial Intelligence Institute, and Gary Moore, University of South Carolina School of Law.

The program featured a "Building our Power by Growing and Diversifying

Membership" panel facilitated by Connie Deerin, LWVSC Membership Director, and a local League leadership panel facilitated by LWVSC Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director Hannah E. Parker on "Building Our Power through Collaborative Partnerships." Panelists included leaders from various Leagues and Member-at-Large Units across the state. Council participants also engaged in a power mapping activity, co-facilitated by Hannah E. Parker and State Program Director Lawson Wetli.

LWVUS National Organizing Senior Manager Luana Chaires attended and participated in a large group activity facilitated by Joan Zaleski, LWVSC Vice President, Voter Services. They provided support to Leaders in "Building our Power through Increased Civic Engagement," through practical application of the relational platform League in Action.



Small group conversations at lunchtime permitted members a chance to dive deeper into these and other topics, such as building capacity through leadership development and fundraising.

The mission of League of Women Voters is "Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy." The bi-annual council meeting serves to address policy and political issues through a process of building power within our membership through education and issue awareness with both a non-partisan and a DEI lens.

—Hannah E. Parker, LWVSC Director, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



Luana Chaires promotes League in Action (LIA).



AI panelists pose for a photo.



Taylor Noble comments during open mic session.



Partnership panelists respond to audience questions.



Joan Zaleski introduces LIA activity.



Members discuss what prompted them to join the League.

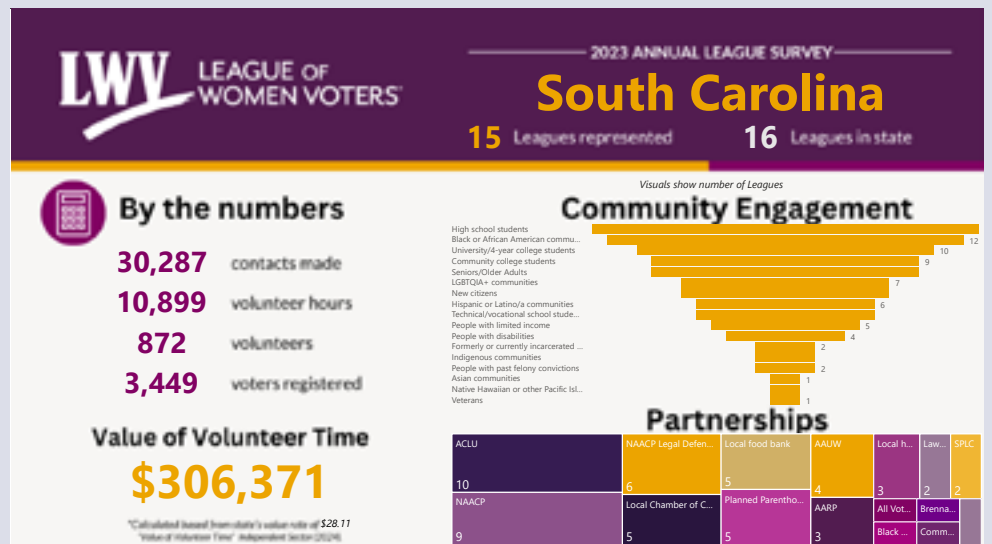
The League of Women Voters 2023 Annual League Survey

The survey results for South Carolina make us proud!

For a small state, our state League and 15 local Leagues tallied large numbers of volunteers, activities, contacts, and registered voters with an impressive \$306,371 in contributed volunteer time. What is not displayed on the graphic were 68 media mentions, 3572 social media followers, and an indeterminate number of VOTE411 visitors!

The LWVSC also conducts an annual survey but for the program and fiscal year in the context of the LWVSC's income and expenses. Be on the lookout for our 2023-2024 collective data in the next edition of *SC Voter*.

Both the national and state surveys help us to better tell our story and demonstrate our impact. Kudos, South Carolina Leagues!



NO HEALTH CARE FOR 345,000

Closing the health insurance gap would cover over 345,000 South Carolinians. Most are workers who make too much to qualify for Medicaid but too little to afford private insurance. More people could access preventive care, reduce emergency room use, improve our state's health outcomes, and lower health care costs for all.

Affordable health care will reduce medical debt and improve financial independence for families. Expanding coverage contributes 30,000 new jobs in South Carolina, bringing employment and health care to rural communities.

Cover SC seeks to strengthen the health and economy of our state through affordable, sustainable healthcare coverage. Eighty organizations, including the LWVSC, joined Cover SC to advocate for Medicaid expansion to close the health care coverage gap. Our neighbor, North Carolina, passed Medicaid expansion last

year and now 450,000 North Carolinians have health care. We are one of nine states that have NOT expanded Medicaid.

This legislative session, the Senate passed a proviso in the budget entitled Health Care Market Reform Study Committee which includes language about Medicaid expansion. The House did not include this proviso, so the budget will need to be finalized in conference committee. The conferees are Senators Peeler, Bennett and Setzler and Representatives Bannister, Lowe and Stavrakis.

The League supports the Senate version, which includes the proviso. It will take two members of the Senate and two members of the House conferees to support the proviso passing. This will occur in June. When the General Assembly reconvenes on June 18, they will vote on the conferees' report and then send the budget to the Governor, who will prepare his veto message.

If the Health Care Market Reform Study proviso passes all the remaining hurdles, the study committee will provide opportunities to review the benefits of passing Medicaid expansion in our state.

In the meantime, Cover SC coalition members, along with many League members, will begin grassroots campaigning during the summer and fall. County specific tool kits will be provided to local advocacy groups to educate and promote the need for closing the health care coverage gap experienced by so many South Carolinians.

The Duke Endowment, the Sisters of Charity and the Jolley Foundation have all provided funding to the Cover SC coalition.

The push to pass Medicaid expansion will be focused on the 2025 session, the sweet spot between elections for everyone. For more information or materials, go to www.cover-sc.org.

—Teresa Arnold, LWVSC Healthcare Advocacy Specialist

We Need to Repeal the Abortion Ban!

Last year, South Carolina's legislature passed a law banning abortions after around six weeks of pregnancy. This law presents a substantial hurdle to accessing reproductive care in our state.

Unfortunately, our state's courts have not provided the check on this harmful law that we hoped for. Last August, our state supreme court (all male) approved the abortion ban. In mid-May, a state judge ruled that the ban will continue to take effect at six weeks (and not nine weeks, as plaintiffs argued).

We know that access to abortion in a number of circumstances is popular in our state, including across party lines. But our government is not responding to popular opinion. Let's change that!

Since March, the LWVSC has been an active partner in the nonpartisan Repeal the Ban SC coalition. Our goal is to encourage South Carolinians to sign the petition to support repealing our state's abortion ban.

The coalition recently decided that we will continue the petition campaign through the summer. And the League can be a powerful part in making this campaign effective.

If enough people sign the petition, we will make a show of strength that could sway legislators and make an impact on public opinion. Also, by reaching out to people about this issue, we can educate and empower our fellow community members about an issue of civic importance during a big election year!

If this is an issue you want to take action on, there are many ways to do it. You can share the petition link and QR code with your networks and on social media. And you can connect with your local League for opportunities to spread the word at local events.

One power of the League is that we model grassroots democracy. And helping spread the word about Repeal the Ban SC is one way to do exactly that. Let's get to work!

—Lawson Wetli, LWVSC Director, State Program



Around the State

A Unique Partnership: WOVEN

The Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Area League has expanded their long-standing partnership with the Hilton Head MLK Committee for Justice to create WOVEN, which stands for Working On Voter Education and Networking. We determined that a separate organization under the auspices of both MLK and the League could be very useful to help more people in our area increase their knowledge about and participate in the voting process.

Since the creation of WOVEN, we have shared ideas, volunteers, events and materials. We've created a WOVEN website and a WOVEN business card. Our first joint effort was a voter education and registration afternoon at the Bluffton Boys and Girls Club. Working with teens and tweens, we talked with students about why voting was so important to making their voices heard on issues they cared about. After answering questions, we challenged them to create artistic posters incorporating some of the ideas discussed. Small prizes were awarded.

Even better, these posters were displayed at the Bluffton Public Library leading up to the 2023 municipal elections. The posters were also on display at the annual MLK Day march and Hilton Head Island High program on January 15.

Other joint projects have occurred and more are in the works. We hope this foundational relationship will grow and flourish.

—Diana Heitman, LWVHHI-BA



WOVEN partners and poster contest entries at Bluffton Library.

Taking the Show on the Road

The LWV of Greenville County partnered with Greenville Connects, a public transit advocacy coalition, to bring voter registration to city bus riders in May. For three weeks prior to the event, Greenville Connects advertised voter registration with posters on the buses that had the potential of reaching 37,455 riders. They also waived the fare for the day and planned to do so again on Primary Election Day.

On the day of the event, 36 volunteers from both groups spoke to about 300 people, distributed 128 League-designed handouts, and signed up 28 new voters! One volunteer encountered a man with a misdemeanor conviction who thought he couldn't vote because he had a "record." When the volunteer explained his rights to him and told him of his eligibility, he registered!

Recognizing Our Teachers

This year the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Area and the Beaufort SC Area Leagues joined together to install special teacher appreciation signs in front of the public and private schools in Beaufort County during Teacher Appreciation Week, May 6-10. The goal of this special project was



Greenville volunteers on the move.

to publicly honor teachers and let them know how much the League of Women Voters understands the importance of everything that teachers do for students, as well as their positive effects on the futures of students and our communities.

League members from both local Leagues developed the project, designed the signs, and worked with the Coordinator of Community Engagement for the Beaufort County School District to place the signs at over 50 public and private schools in the county.

—Linda Gustafson, LWVHHI-BA



Catherine Forester, LWV Beaufort

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SC VOTER

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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.

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THE CLOCK IS TICKING.

The LWVSC has plans to educate and drive more people to the polls than ever before in this consequential election. We have set a lofty goal of raising \$15,000 by July 30. But before we can put our plans into action, we urgently need YOU!

Rush your best gift to us today! The election countdown has begun.

Reliable, Nonpartisan Election Resource



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