

# **Study on the Efficacy of the Print *SC Voter***

## *Prepared for the LWVSC State Board, October 2019*

The LWVSC produces, prints, and mails a quarterly eight-page newsletter, *The SC Voter*, to its members as well as to state legislators and selected other stakeholders and interested parties. During 2019, the total number of recipients each quarter has been approximately 1375. The high design and paper quality of the newsletter results in a professional, attractive product. The layout and graphic design elements of this production are donated to the LWVSC, reducing the total annual cost to approximately \$6000 for the bulk mailing.

In response to a request by the LWVSC 2019-2020 Budget Committee, the Communications Committee of the LWVSC Board has undertaken and prepared the following report on the efficacy of printing and mailing the *SC Voter*. In developing this study, the Committee focused on five areas of research:

- Neurological and emotional effects of print vs. digital communications
- Communications and marketing “best practices” in the non-profit world regarding print vs (or plus) digital
- Delivery preferences, to the extent known, of LWVSC members.
- Usefulness of the printed newsletter in communicating with SC state legislators, our coalition partners, and other stakeholders, and for recruiting new members.
- Effectiveness of electronic communications as currently practiced by the LWV in South Carolina (local and state leagues).

Each is discussed here in turn, followed by

- Conclusions and
- Recommendations to the Board.

### **I. Neurological and emotional effects of print vs. electronic communications**

Studies show that print and electronic communications have different neurological effects on the brain and that people learn differently from the two types of communications. People also have different emotional responses to print vs. digital communications. Each medium, each channel of communication, has its distinct place and usefulness, its own optimal content and its own impact.

Recent Temple University research studies of responses to ads show that “content on paper affects our brains in different and more powerful ways.” People were exposed to material once and then their memory of the material was tested one week later. Methods used included eye tracking, skin conductance, and heart rate, and a MRI machine to test memory the following week.

Findings showed that digital ads were processed more quickly but paper ads engaged viewers for more time. A week later, viewers remembered the physical ads more

quickly and confidently. And the physical ads provoked more emotional responses than the digital, specifically, more activity in brain areas associated with value and desire. (Source: <https://www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog/articles/print-vs-digital.htm>)

Contrary to widespread belief, response rates to direct mail are rising 43% year over year, and studies find that, unlike with digital mail, 77% of consumers sort physical mail immediately and find it pleasurable to receive. More than half consider physical mail the most trustworthy, and 67% consider it more personal, conveying legitimacy and confidence. Most consumers appreciate that print communications require greater effort and investment than digital. (Source: <https://www.neoncrm.com/direct-mail-vs-email-nonprofits/>)

Many studies show that people like getting mail and like engaging with print materials, which stimulate more senses. The tangibility, the scent, and the feel of the paper arouse significant and pleasurable responses. Also, mailed print materials reach directly into the home, and are consumed with fewer internal distractions (hyperlinks, temptations to leave the page) than digital. (Source: <https://www.business2community.com/b2b-marketing/print-vs-digital-media-print-is-not-going-anywhere-02052035>)

Another issue is computer skills. Now that half the world's adults have a smartphone, it is easy to overrate computer skills. The OECD, a club of mostly rich nations, recently published a survey on adult skills ([https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/skills-matter\\_9789264258051-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/skills-matter_9789264258051-en)), capturing the struggle most people have with "proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and computer skills." (Summary: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/a-quarter-of-adults-can-t-use-a-computer/>)

The conclusions:

- Almost a quarter of people do not use a computer or refused to use one to test their proficiency or failed the most basic level of scrolling through a page or using a mouse.
- Of the remaining 75%, almost half could not navigate pages smoothly or sort items. The group relevant to us, LWV members and stakeholders, are more educated and committed learners than most of the world's richer people. LWV's leadership cannot function without an above average computer literacy. However, this study shows that the proficiency of the active leadership does not reflect that of even an educated membership.

## **II. Communications and marketing “best practices” in the non-profit world regarding print vs (or plus) digital**

Research shows that nonprofits find increasingly that both print and digital communications, as well as social media, are required to best meet the needs of their membership and stakeholders. Each channel of communications, including social media, telephone call-ins, webinars, etc., leads to and strengthens the others. The across-

the-board advice is that print and digital should be seen as complementary, not either/or.

The following table demonstrates some of the reasons why a “both print and digital” strategy is needed:

	Print	Email
<b>Pros</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● accessible – no technology required</li> <li>● high quality design</li> <li>● well suited for longer, in-depth articles, and different content</li> <li>● longer shelf life</li> <li>● sensory experience of holding the newsletter</li> <li>● connects with recipients who do not open email</li> <li>● indicates serious investment</li> <li>● picturing, profiling stakeholders in print is pleasurable to them, inspires loyalty and appreciation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● faster delivery (for timely news)</li> <li>● inexpensive</li> <li>● well suited for shorter, bulletted, easily skimmed material</li> <li>● can be more frequent</li> <li>● can track “opens” and “clicks”</li> <li>● can be shared electronically</li> <li>● can link to other media (videos, articles, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Cons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● expensive (design, printing, postage)</li> <li>● longer timeline for production needed</li> <li>● can’t track usage</li> <li>● can be shared only physically</li> <li>● can have limited “real estate” (number of pages)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● can easily get lost in today’s email overload</li> <li>● formatting looks different based on email platform (limits design quality)</li> <li>● less personal experience</li> <li>● suggests less serious investment</li> <li>● limited audience re use of internet, tech preferences</li> </ul>

(Adapted from: <https://www.williamswhittle.com/print-newsletters-vs-email-newsletters/>)

Human beings perceive print and email differently, which is an important consideration as nonprofits develop their communications strategies. Email is seen as cost-effective, quick, informal, spontaneous, informative, and smart. Print is seen as personal, formal, expensive, official, important, believable, reliable, considered, and informative.

Email is preferred for information that is time-sensitive and easy to skim, when a response is needed, when sending reminders or confirmations, when introducing new opportunities or events taking place in the near future.

Print is preferred for material that needs more interaction and consideration, and for material that takes time to read and might be kept for future reference. It is viewed as more personal and makes the recipient feel more valued. Therefore, print is preferred when the content is more in-depth, when it might not be read right away, when establishing a deeper, trusted relationship with the recipient, and when the nonprofit wants the material to be kept around and shared with others, e.g., to help recruit new members). (Source: <https://badgergroup.com/why-print-newsletters/>)

A 2014 survey found that “more than 80% of respondents indicate that they always read the print newsletters and magazines that they subscribe to or receive free” from groups they have a relationship with. The same respondents said they read “e-zines, blogs, and other digital media included in paid subscriptions only about 20 percent of the time.” Much digital communication is deleted immediately. A major reason for the higher rate of thorough reading of print communications is the longer shelf life: the recipient can set the newsletter aside and be reminded by its physical presence to read it at a later time. The appreciation of members who are pictured and recognized in print is also a factor to be considered. (Source: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/251865>)

Other points:

- Print is seen as less fleeting, has a wider reach, can be shared with friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, donors, other stakeholders, and prospective members.
- Print is appreciated as taking greater effort and indicating greater seriousness of intent to communicate with the recipient.
- There are fewer internal distractions (i.e., hyperlinks) with print, which contributes to in-depth reading and lasting comprehension;
- The recipient of print has a tactile experience and can see the whole design, layout of the newsletter, how the parts fit together.
- Demographics matter: groups over 55 and under 24 are among the most responsive to print communications, which, for the latter group, break through the digital clutter of their lives.

- Print newsletters and reports are found to be powerful retention tools, often recapturing members and donors whose attention has lapsed. They are an opportunity for the nonprofit to show growth and highlight current activities.

(Sources: <https://www.neoncrm.com/direct-mail-vs-email-nonprofits/>; <http://echoyourstory.com/annual-report-print-vs-digital/>)

A full compilation of our research on this topic (sections I and II) accompanies this study as Addendum A.

### **III. Preferences, to the extent known, of LWVSC members**

In an effort to determine the preferences of our LWVSC members, we used two methods:

1. A box was included in Summer and Fall issues of the 2019 *SC Voter* inviting members to express their preference in one of three ways, as follows:

#### **Let Us Know What You Think!**

Would you prefer to receive this publication, the *SC Voter*,

1. only by mail (as now),
2. only as an attachment to an email, or
3. both ways?

Please indicate your preference at this link: <http://bit.ly/scvoter1> (typed into your browser)

OR Call 803-636-0431 and leave your name and local league and indicate which of the three options above you prefer,

OR Email <[copresident.lwvsc@gmail.com](mailto:copresident.lwvsc@gmail.com)> and leave your name and local league and indicate which of the three options above you prefer

If you take no action, we will assume you are happy receiving the *SC Voter* through the mail as you do now.

**Thank you!**

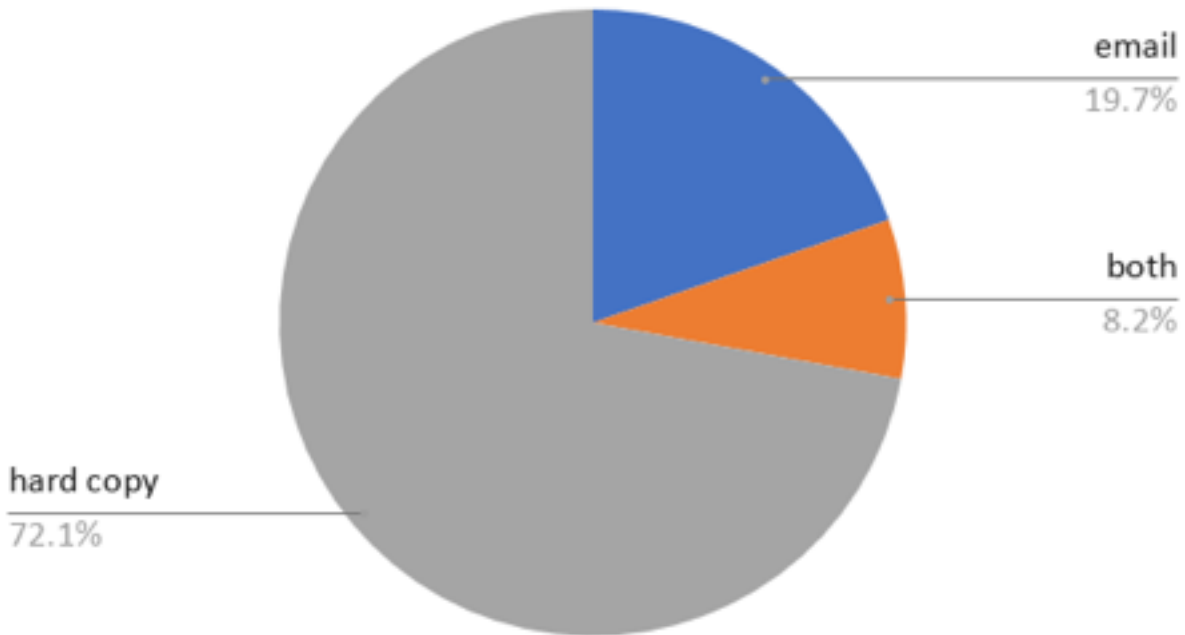
#### **The results from the *SC Voter* box method were as follows:**

88 prefer receiving the newsletter in the mail. This includes 4 phoning in a choice, plus 84 with no email address, so assigned hard copy preference by default.

24 prefer receiving the newsletter as an email attachment

10 prefer receiving both

Delivery Preference (responses by email, phone, & google form)



2. A post card, pictured below, was sent to all members excluding those who had responded above, with a return pre-paid form to be mailed to LWVSC.

The League of Women Voters of SC  
Newsletter - **SC Voter**

How do you wish to receive it?

Select one be-

low: Email

Postal Service

Both



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please Print

Please mail before October 15, 2019

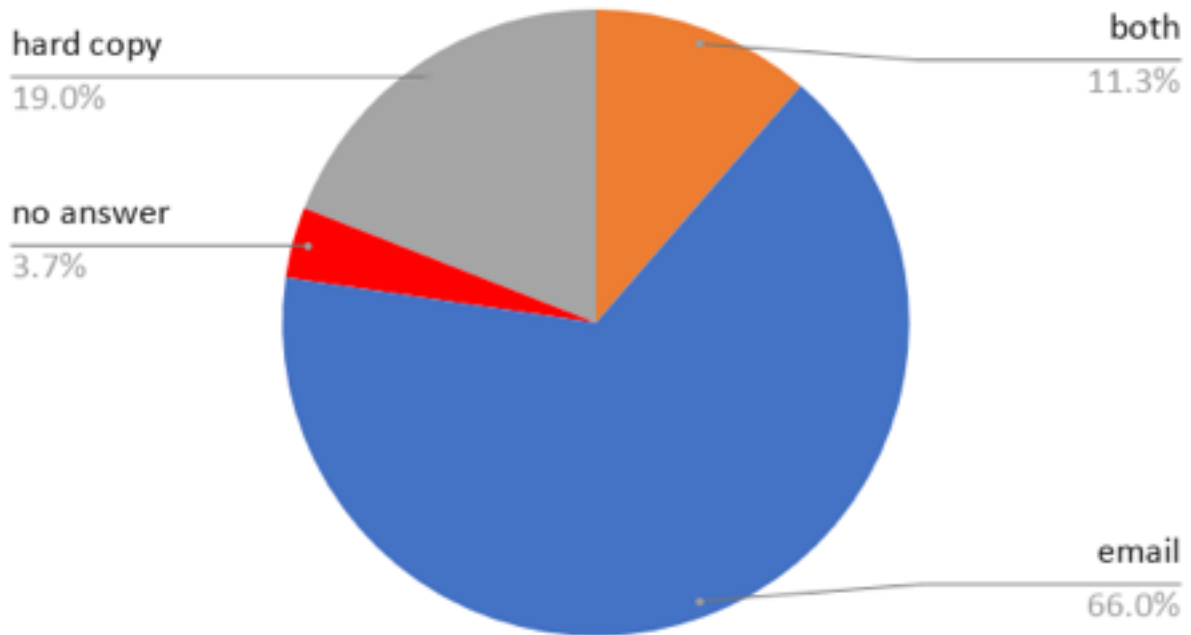
League of Women Voters  
of South Carolina  
PO Box 8453  
Columbia, SC 29202

The results were tabulated after the due date of October 20, 2019.  
1024 postcards were sent with 523 returned, an approximately **51% response level**.

**The results from the post card method were as follows:**

101 prefer receiving the print newsletter in the mail  
343 prefer receiving the newsletter as an email attachment  
60 prefer receiving both print and email attachment  
19 returned postcard with no preference selected

Delivery Preference (responses via postcard)



**Totals of all methods of gathering data (both the SC Voter box and the postcards):**

70 prefer both hard copy and email

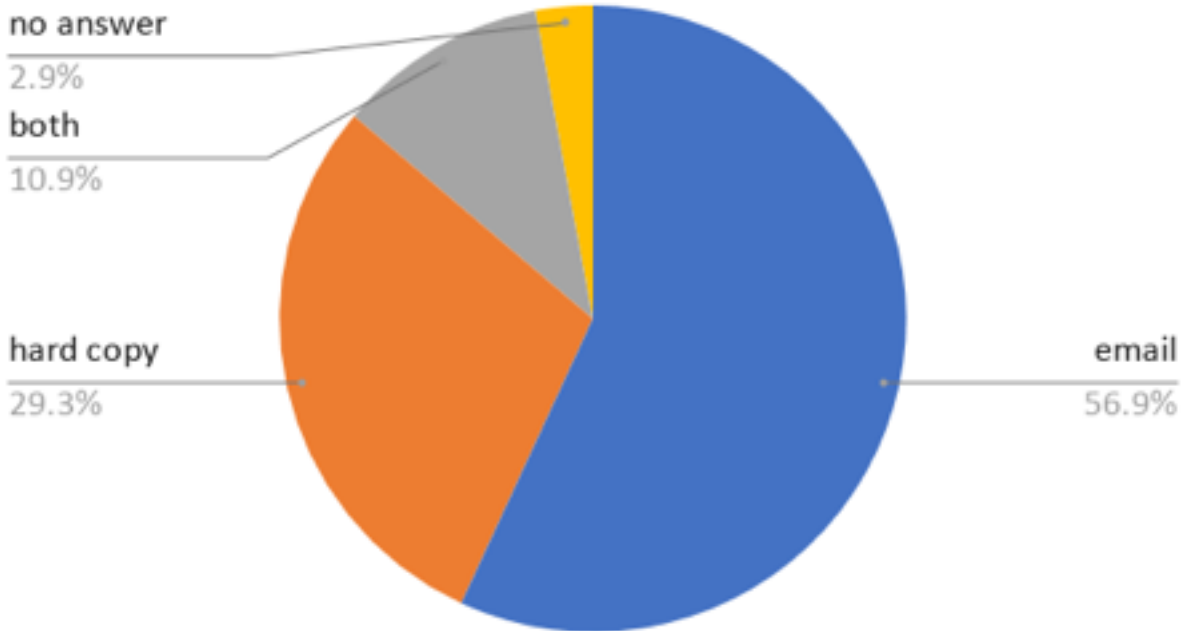
189 prefer only hard copy

367 prefer only email

19 specified no preference



### Delivery Preference (all data collecting methods)



It should be kept in mind that the responders were self-selected, not randomly chosen; i.e., they were motivated to respond. We do not know the preferred delivery method of those who did not take the initiative to respond, although it is reasonable to assume that some may have relied on the statement in the *SC Voter* box: “If you take no action, we will assume you are happy receiving the *SC Voter* through the mail as you do now.”

#### **IV. Usefulness of the print newsletter in communicating with SC state legislators, our coalition partners, and other stakeholders.**

Communication with SC legislators and coalition partners is an important goal of our communications strategy and an important benefit of the print *SC Voter*. We have found extremely low, virtually non-existent, levels of success with digital communications to legislators.

The LWVSC has twice surveyed the open rate by SC’s state assembly members. Using a Gmail tracer app in early 2018, we did a pilot study of the open rate of 13 upstate legislators; two legislators, or 15%, opened the email. To make our survey larger and thus more reliable, we created a MailChimp database of the legislators and sent another email to all of them in early October 2019. Of the 164 legislators who received the email (6 “bounced”), four, or 2.5%, of the recipients opened it.

We had heard anecdotally and had strong reason to believe that most SC legislators “never” open their official email boxes. These two cases bear out the validity of this assumption. Apparently many do have private email addresses that they use regularly to conduct business. The print *SC Voter* is placed in each legislator’s mailbox; thus we know that it is at least seen by the legislators, and its professional design and quality make it a good communication tool.

(With the benefit of this knowledge about the low rate of email opens, we now emphasize calling the Columbia office phone numbers of legislators when we ask our members to advocate for an issue.)

Informal “polling” of our coalition partners resulted in strong and unanimous advice: “don’t give up print!” Reasons given were similar to those cited in the general research above: ability to set the *Voter* aside and read later; ability to share the print piece with others; and the professional, high quality appearance indicating investment, aiding recruitment and fund raising, and having a positive effect on legislators and coalition partners. Several leaders of coalition organizations asked to have copies mailed to them personally and also to their offices.

Also, the print *SC Voter* is an important public relations and marketing tool that can’t be replaced by digital communications. Copies of the *SC Voter* can be distributed to the general public at candidate forums, public policy programs, etc. and at meetings with potential new members.

## **V. Effectiveness of electronic communications as currently practiced by the LWV in South Carolina (local and state leagues)**

### **1. Local League survey re communications/newsletters:**

We developed a Survey Monkey about communications methods and got responses from all 12 local Leagues, though questions were sometimes skipped. The following questions were asked.

#### **Survey of Local League Newsletter Data**

1. Does your League have a newsletter or similar form of communication? (Please select all that apply.)

- > We produce a paper newsletter that is mailed to our members.
- > We produce a digital (electronic) newsletter.
- > We do not produce a newsletter.
- > Our newsletter includes photos and graphic elements.

2. If you do not have a newsletter, how do you communicate with your members?

- > Face Book

- > Telephone
- > Other

Please describe, if you selected "other" above.

3. How often is your newsletter produced?

- > Monthly
- > Quarterly
- > Other (please describe)

4. What are the inputs required to produce your newsletter?

- > Financial cost per year
- > Average number of hours of preparation required per issue

5. If your newsletter is digital, how do you produce it? (please choose one)

- > We include our newsletter in the body of an email.
- > We attach our newsletter to an email as a separate document.
- > We use the Mail Chimp platform.
- > We use the Constant Contact platform.
- > Other (please specify)

6. If your newsletter is digital, what is the average open rate, over at least a six month period (i.e., on average, what percentage of your members open the emails that deliver the newsletter)?

7. How many of your members do not use email (include both those who do not have an email address and those who have one but never open email)?

8. If your newsletter is digital, do you provide it to members who do not use email, and if so, how is it produced and delivered?

9. In particular, if you use Constant Contact, how do you produce a copy to deliver to those members who do not use email, and to deposit in your archives?

10. Please indicate by name the person who is submitting this form, your position (e.g., webmaster, communications director, president?), and which local league you represent. Thank you!

**The responses received are reflected in the following table.**

	Type of news-letter	If no news-letter	How often?	Cost?	Inputs	Platform	Open Rate	Service to non-email?	Archived?	Responding
<b>Beaufort</b>	Digital, w/ graphics	also phone and Face-Book	Qtrly		10 hrs	Mailchimp	Unknown	no service	saved in on-line folder	Catherine Forester
<b>Charleston</b>	Digital, w/ graphics		Monthly	\$700	20 hrs?	Constant Contact	42%	no service to the few non-email	Historian prints, archives	Shayna Howell
<b>Clemson</b>	Print and digital, w/ graphics		Monthly	\$1410		mailed and attchd to email	Unknown	can access .pdf on website		Ruth Reed
<b>Columbia</b>	Mailed & digital w/ graphics		Monthly	\$100	20 hr.	Attachment, soon moving to Mailchimp	25% estimate	<5%, printed and snail mailed to those		Susan Cirulli
<b>Darlington</b>	None (minutes may contain graphics and serve as news)	Notices by email, phone, text, snail mail	As needed for meetings	In-kind gift	1 hr plus	minutes sent in body of email or sometimes attchd to email		3 non-email, phone, snail mailed to those		Sheila Haney
<b>Florence</b>	Digital		Monthly	\$0	2	In body of email	90%	2 people, snail mailed		Frances Elmore

	Type of news-letter	If no news-letter	How often?	Cost?	Inputs	Platform	Open Rate	Service to non-email?	Archived?	Responding
<b>Hilton H. I.-Bluffton</b>	Digital w/ graphics		qtrly *See below	\$0	Short blasts take little time, long take more time	Mailchimp	*See below; 36-64 %	no service to the 3 or 4, but some informed thrgh word of mouth		Mary Agnes Garman
<b>Horry County</b>	None	Email, text, phone						"a lot" no email or no response		Elizabeth Weems
<b>Georgetown</b>	None	Email about event, etc.		\$0				None		Zane Wilson
<b>Greenville</b>	Digital w/ graphics		**see below	\$0	ca. 15 hrs.	Mailchimp	60-80 %	1, snail mailed		Lawson Wetli
<b>Sumter</b>	Digital w/ graphics	Phone	May do qtrly			In body of email		1, informed in person		Dee Woodward
<b>Spartanburg</b>	Digital	Facebook	monthly, mid-monthly updates as needed	\$0	2 hrs	Mailchimp	ca. 55%	<5 w/o email, no service	Keep online folder, probably need to do more	Phillip Stone

*\*[from HHI-B]* "Newsletters are sent to a broad audience including members, friends, political and press contacts, and League leaders. This rate is 36%. E-blasts to this broad audience increase to 52%. E-blasts read by members is 64.7%. From this data,

it appears that even our members are more likely to read short e-blasts from us versus the lengthy newsletter. Hence we are moving to quarterly newsletters.”

*\*\*[from Greenville]* “We’re in a state of flux. Historically, we had a quarterly, hard-copy snail-mailed newsletter. Starting a few years ago, this became a quarterly PDF, mostly-emailed newsletter. A bit over a year ago, we began using Mailchimp for member communications, and the line between "message to members" and "newsletter" is really blurring. This year, we've sent out one "newsletter" (PDF, emailed) and a number of MailChimp messages that serve a similar function.”

#### Summary of Local League Newsletter Survey findings:

- One local League prints and mails its newsletter to all members; most local leagues produce a regular digital newsletter with graphics. Others use email with news and notices embedded. A few have no newsletter.
- Frequency published: six monthly, two quarterly. Two of the largest Leagues plan to move towards less frequent comprehensive newsletters, depending more heavily on shorter e-blasts.
- Cost: zero for those embedding their news or newsletters within an email or as an attached pdf, and for the five who use a free Mailchimp account. Only one local league uses the more costly digital platform, Constant Contact. Most expensive is the one newsletter that is printed and mailed as well as produced digitally.
- Time input: local Leagues report spending a range of 2 to 20 hours preparing monthly newsletters.
- Open-rate: responses are all over the map with 36% being the lower limit for those who trace opens, up to 60 - 80%. The nonprofit norm is 20%.
- Servicing members without email: Reported number of members without email ranges from “a lot” to only 1. Some local leagues send a printed version of the digital newsletter to their non-email members by snail mail. Most do not trace those who have an email address but who never open the emails.
- Archiving: little attention is given to archiving for a permanent record and history of the League. Two local leagues archive only in online folders; only one reports printing out and archiving.

#### Overall:

- All of our local leagues use some digital communications. Only one prints and mails a newsletter. Three do not produce a newsletter, but do embed news in occasional emails; several others produce excellent digital newsletters that

achieve open rates significantly above the norm expected for non-profits. At best, however, that leaves 40-60% of members who are not opening, and therefore, not receiving a given piece of information when the local league is relying entirely on digital communications. Further, two leagues report experiences that support the research discussed earlier – that digital communications are most effective for brief, easily skimmed, bullet-pointed content. Both Hilton Head Island-Bluffton and Greenville are reducing the production of their digital newsletters because of the clearly greater effectiveness of short e-blasts.

## 2. Success of LWVSC digital communications sent to members:

According to a recent article in *The Economist*, 50% of the people in the rich world can barely muster composing a simple email (Source: [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/a-quarter-of-adults-can-t-use-a-computer/.](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/a-quarter-of-adults-can-t-use-a-computer/))

People who fit the older age range of the League's main cohort are less computer literate, but that should be balanced by the League's much higher education level. Millennials, those 24 years old and younger, are also shown to prefer print in many instances, perhaps because their digital world is so overloaded.

Despite the general low level of digital fluency in the rich world, LWVSC generally excels in digital engagement. However, the relatively high percentage of response ignores the large nondigital group, members who are not opening and receiving our electronic communications.

The following data is based on studying a sample of 200 recipients.

- LWVSC's open rate for Mailchimp communications averages 40%, twice the average for nonprofit groups. However, the majority of our members, 60%, do not open a typical message. We have no way of knowing how many of these read, keep, and/or pass on the print *SC Voter*, but given the low overall rate of computer fluency, it is likely that many of our members, along with the general public, are more comfortable with print.
- About 15% of our Mailchimp recipients have never opened a Mailchimp.
- At the other extreme, 15% almost always open Mailchimps from LWVSC; many are in the leadership circle.
- Approximately eighty members cannot be added to Mailchimp because they give no email. (Some of these may be partners or spouses of League members.)

- Focus matters, e.g., there's a consistently higher open rate of content about women's rights.
- The LWVSC open percentages fit with the Charleston League's long experience with excellently produced digital newsletters. Charleston's open rate is usually 40% and can go to 50%. When Charleston includes its emails to non-members, the average open rate is about 40%. Even that high level of success means that 50-60% are not receiving the communication.

## VI. Conclusions

1. This study has provided an excellent opportunity to review and assess our entire communications and marketing strategy. The printed and mailed *SC Voter* is only one piece of the LWVSC communications and marketing strategy, along with Mailchimps, social media postings, our website, our legislative update phone-ins, and action alerts. Each has its distinct purpose and benefits. *They are not interchangeable.* *The Voter* provides benefits re appearance, touch, content, usage, outreach, and quality that cannot be replicated by an electronic newsletter or any of the other types of communication. Those benefits would simply be lost if LWVSC were to give up the print *SC Voter*.
2. We conclude that, since LWVUS has stopped printing the *National Voter*, since our local leagues have almost entirely given up print communications with members and stakeholders, and since local leagues are finding less digital success with the longer content that is more suitable for print, *it is more than ever incumbent on the state league to maintain the print SC Voter.* It is a vehicle for in-depth articles on the views, priorities, and activities of the state league not provided effectively through any other channel of communication. It is also the preferred vehicle for certain types of content – essay-style reflections by leaders and members, reviews of events, policy analyses, profiles of members, discussion of League positions, etc.
3. At least 80 LWVSC members, almost 10%, do not receive email communications. For those members and for many others who do not generally open email or attachments, the print *SC Voters* are likely the sole LWV communications that they receive from year to year.
4. If we were to cease printing the *SC Voter*, we would be overruling the stated preference of at least 40% of those members who have indicated a preference.
5. If we were to cease printing the *SC Voter*, we would lose our only LWVSC communication link with SC legislators as a group and would disappoint many of our coalition partners. Our research, cited above, shows that our legislators virtually ignore email. At least some have been observed receiving and reading the print *SC Voter*, and all have the opportunity to see it as a reminder of the League's presence and work. Many of our coalition partners have expressed appreciation of the *SC Voter*.



Further, we would lose a significant recruitment tool; the *SC Voter* is an attractive, professional piece, filled with information and very useful for taking to forums, meetings about forming possible new MALs, etc.

6. At one time we all got much too much printed mail, and email stood out. Now the situation is reversed: we get very little printed mail that holds personal interest for us, and hundreds of emails everyday, or every few hours. Printed mail is considered more special and is much less likely to get “swiped off” without a glance.
7. The print *SC Voter* is a promising source of fundraising for the future. We only recently started including a tear-off form for donations as part of each *SC Voter*; \$350 (including one membership renewal) has been mailed in with the tear-off form during the past few months,. We can also begin to use other techniques to better realize the *Voter’s* fundraising potential, for example, encouraging renewals by printing on the mailing label the membership expiration date.
8. The print *SC Voter* is a vital part of our archived materials. We are in danger of losing 50 years of LWVSC and local league history as the world embraces digital communications. Efforts are made by some to create hard copies and pdfs of communications, but much is irrevocably lost and not archived (including some items, such as Mailchimps, by LWVSC itself).

## **VII. Recommendations**

Based on the research, collection of data, and conclusions presented above, the Communications Committee recommends maintaining the print *SC Voter* as a vital part of our overall communications and marketing strategy and as a worthwhile investment of our funds.

Further, we hold no objection to accommodating the stated electronic delivery preference of an individual member by emailing the *SC Voter* as a pdf attachment, timed to go out when the print *SC Voter* is estimated to arrive through the mail, as long as it is clearly understood that (because of bulk mail regulations) this accommodation will not significantly reduce the cost of printing and mailing the *SC Voter*.

Submitted by the LWVSC Communications Committee  
(Jean Wood, Chair, Linda Powers, Nancy Moore, and Holley Ulbrich and Christe-McCoy, advisors)  
October 30, 2019

**Addendum A:** Compilation of Print vs. Digital Research – attached as a separate document.