

# LWVUS State Election Observer Program Toolkit

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*Real Life Examples, Questions for Election Officials and Election Observer forms have been adapted from League of Women Voters of Wisconsin 2012 Convention Caucus, which can be found on the [League Management site](#).*

## Program Overview and Goals

### *Why observe the polls?*

Election observing is an important part of the political process, and every election year non-profits, political campaigns, candidates and government agencies alike send volunteer election observers to observe polls across the country. For the League of Women Voters, election observing presents a unique opportunity to observe the election process first hand to ensure that all eligible voters can exercise their right to vote and gather information about what's working and what's not so the process can be improved. It is also a great way for Leagues to engage new and returning volunteers and be visible in your community in a very valuable and high-profile way. With volunteer election observers observing the process, no voter will leave the polling place without knowing their rights and what steps they can take to protect their right to vote.

Election observing is necessary for a number of reasons. While poll workers, usually volunteers employed by local elections offices, believe in the work they are doing and are well intentioned, human bias and misinformation can create situations that will potentially disenfranchise voters. With new voter ID laws across the country, we have seen cases of confusion at the polls – both from official workers and voters alike. To help alleviate this confusion and protect the right to vote, the League of Women Voters encourages state and local Leagues to participate in and organize election observing programs during primary and general elections.

With constant attacks on voters' rights, and the push from Leagues across the country to enact strong pro-voter reforms, gathering information about what happens on Election Day is crucial. Volunteer election observers are able to see firsthand the struggle some voters go through at the polls, whether it is long lines or being turned away for not providing the proper ID. These stories can be used (with permission) to promote changes to discriminatory laws, relayed in testimony, the press, and supporters online. Real life examples strengthen the League's work on election reforms by shedding light on the individual voters impacted by discriminatory election laws.

### *Goals*

1. Recruit, train and place volunteers in targeted polling locations.
2. Provide consistent training to volunteers who will document what happens at the polls on Election Day (or during Early Voting if applicable).
3. Provide independent, nonpartisan, reliable documentation of issues related to implementation of the election laws.
4. Encourage volunteers to stay involved with their local League!
5. Work with coalition partners to develop a broad reaching program.
6. Collect and analyze election observer's reports to develop a report on the League's findings and a set of recommendations for how to improve the process for future advocacy.

## The role of an Election Observer

### *Observe*

Election observers are observers – their role is to not interfere with the elections process but to watch and document what happens. Think of election observers as the first line of defense against disenfranchisement; election observers are able to observe voters in the moment and take action if necessary to ensure that the voter's rights are protected. While election observers are physically present in the polling place, they are not actively participating in the process. Election observers can alert poll workers to issues that they see (i.e. someone being turned away from the polls, discriminatory remarks, etc.) but they should not disrupt the voting process. Both poll workers and voters alike should be observed. Of course, all volunteers with the League will remain nonpartisan and objective in all observations.

### *Document*

Every election observer will be given an Onsite Questionnaire to fill out while at the polls. This document is where the volunteer will record in writing what she observed that day – any voters being turned away, long lines, or general observations that will be helpful for the League. When permitted, election observers can also record the voting process (as long as they are at a distance so as to not record confidential information). Video or audio recordings can be helpful when the election observer believes that proof will be needed, for example when there is an argument between a voter and a poll worker or even between two voters.

Election observers should be as thorough as possible when documenting the voting process. If a voter is turned away and leaves, the election observer should approach them once they have exited the polling place and try to A) find out why the voter was turned away B) encourage the voter to stay and vote a provisional ballot if necessary and C) collect as much information from the voter as possible (name, contact, address, etc.). This information will help the League assist the voter if possible. Collecting information on the poll worker is also important, but can be done after talking to the voter to ensure that no one leaves without casting a ballot.

### *Provide assistance*

Election observers will be able to provide assistance to voters in the form of information. If a voter is turned away without voting, the election observer can help the voter determine the appropriate and best next step, whether that is returning to the polls for another attempt or contacting a lawyer (lawyers working with the League and other election organizations). Election observers should have with them their state's rules regarding voting, such as the list of acceptable IDs (if needed at all) and whether or not voters can vote out of precinct. Armed with this information, election observers can inform voters of their rights and keep them from being disenfranchised.

While election observers should never interfere with the poll workers' job, volunteers should alert the poll worker in charge of any issues. In a non-disruptive way that does not interrupt the voting process election observers can approach the lead poll worker. If the poll worker does not resolve the situation, the election observer can step outside of the polling place to call the lawyers for further guidance.

### ***Best Practices***

Every state has different rules concerning elections – make sure you know your state’s laws before training League members and volunteers. In general, though, the same best practices will most likely apply nationwide.

- Let the poll worker in charge know you have arrived – ask where to stand if not obvious
- Follow their instructions and direct questions to her/him
- Wear name tag and/or badge at the polling place
- Don’t be disruptive – take phone calls outside, stand/sit to the side
- No electioneering of any kind
- Bring snacks/water
- Bring a notebook, multiple pens, cell phone, and cell phone charger
- If your state has photo ID laws, bring a list of acceptable forms as a reference
- Save all important phone numbers in your phone BEFORE you get to the polls
- Speak to the election worker in charge first to address concerns
  - Do not escalate the situation – if they are not responsive, call the lawyers
  - Do not interfere with the voting process
- If someone is turned away from the polls, approach them outside the polling place
  - Get details but most importantly: *Don’t let them leave without voting!*
- Remember: *Election workers are volunteers, too!*
  - They have good intentions but might have wrong information/assumptions.
- Don’t be afraid to alert the lawyers if something is not right

## Real Life Examples

### **If your state DOES NOT have photo ID**

*Someone comes in to vote and is asked for photo ID by an election worker.*

Document everything, alert the voter to their rights if they leave without voting. Talk to the election worker in charge. Call the lawyers if necessary.

*Someone comes in to vote and asks to have their ID checked.*

Again, document everything. Make sure the election workers alerts the voter that no ID is necessary. The election worker should not check the voter's ID.

*Another election observer tells the election worker in charge that IDs should be required to vote that day.*

Listen to the conversation – the election worker in charge should clarify that nothing is required. Make sure to document the conversation, and observe voters to ensure that no IDs are asked for.

### **If your state DOES have photo ID**

*The voter shows a valid form of ID and the election worker makes the voter cast a provisional ballot.*

Do not interfere with the voting process, but alert the election worker in charge. Make sure they let the election workers know all acceptable forms of ID. The voter should not have to vote provisionally.

*The election worker asks the voter for additional forms of ID when only 1 is required.*

Document the situation and ensure that the voter is indeed able to vote. Make sure the election worker in charge knows that only 1 ID is required and alerts everyone else. Call the lawyers if necessary. Collect the voter's contact information and encourage them to also call the lawyers if they are forced to vote a provisional ballot.

### **Other Examples**

*Someone other than a poll worker challenges a voter's right to vote.*

Document how the issue is handled. Make sure the voter knows their rights if they leave without voting. Alert the election worker in charge. Do not confront the challenger directly – that is the election worker's job.

*Other election observers challenge actions or decisions of the election worker in charge.*

Document how this is handled, if needed contact the lawyers.

*Someone is asked to sign the poll book and is unable to do so and they are not allowed to vote.*

Document and inform the election worker in charge. Voters with disabilities should be assisted – everyone has the right to cast their ballot.

*The polling location is not ADA compliant, preventing some voters with disabilities from casting a ballot.*

Alert the election worker in charge. If the issue is not resolved, contact the lawyers.  
Record all contact information from the voter.

*You hear a voter or election worker making discriminatory comments.*

Alert the election worker in charge. Every eligible voter at the polling location has the right to vote and not feel intimidated while they are there. Document the situation.

*A voter left political materials in the voting booth.*

If you see a voter walk in with a stack of papers and leave with nothing, ask to the election worker in charge to check their booth. Make sure all materials are thrown in the trash.

*Long lines have formed and the polls are now closed. Voters are disgruntled about the long wait, and some people start to leave. Election workers try to tell voters at the end of the line that the polls have already closed.*

Hold the lines! Talk to the people at the end of the line and make sure they know their rights – as long as they were inside the polling location (or in line) before polls closed, they have the right to vote. Encourage them to stay. Make sure no one is turned away by election workers, and if so encourage that voter to stay. Alert the lawyers and the election worker in charge if people are being turned away.

### ***Remember***

Get voter contact information when anyone is turned away, anyone is issued a provisional ballot, or a voter has a bad experience that may require follow up. You should talk to voters once they are outside of the polling place. Do not tell election workers what they *should or should not do* – instead alert them to the laws and the situations you have observed. We do not want to put anyone on the defense. Most election workers are volunteering their time because they believe in voting – they just might not know the specifics of the law!

## Creating your Program

A statewide or local election observing program is a great way to engage League members in a new way, while at the same time recruit non-members and supporters to be active in their communities.

### Volunteer Recruitment

#### *Determine key polling locations*

With so many polling locations across each state (or community), recruiting volunteers for each site will be impossible. Instead, focus on key factors to determine which polling locations will best be served by League volunteers. Working from past data (from word of mouth or coalition partners) determine the precincts that are most at risk for disenfranchisement. Some factors to consider: high minority districts, precincts known to have Election Day issues (such as long lines or broken ballot machines), and areas with high student populations.

Think through the dynamics of your state and what, if any, laws have been recently changed regarding elections. Each state will have specific challenges and considerations – and the League is uniquely qualified to determine the areas of focus because of the hard work we do every year to support fair and accessible elections.

- In the 2012 presidential Election there were lines of people trying to vote in Florida until well past midnight. Sending volunteers to those precincts with above average turnout would be helpful so that the League can ensure that no voters leave before casting a ballot, and everyone is in fact allowed to vote.
- In North Carolina an omnibus elections bill was passed in 2013 with widespread impacts on voters, including cuts to early voting, same day registration, out of precinct voting, and new ID laws. Due to recent lawsuits (that the LWVNC and other partner organizations participated in) and rule changes from the state, some of the provisions of the 2013 bill have again been changed. This will inevitably cause confusion among both voters and poll workers alike. To determine where the greatest impact might be, Leagues can look to data on which groups were most impacted by the laws (who used same day registration, for example) and focus on precincts with great populations of the impacted communities.

As much as you want to fill your top priorities first, however, sometimes that will not be possible. For example, if there is a volunteer who does not live close to a priority precinct you may need to find a polling place closer to them. Make sure you are flexible enough in your plans to accommodate all volunteers – each person who wants to help should be given some role!

#### *Develop a Schedule*

Before actively recruiting volunteers, the state or local League should create an election observing schedule. This would include both Election Day and any early voting days that are deemed necessary. Use this schedule to place volunteers in your priority precincts first. Creating a schedule will also allow you to see exactly how many volunteers you will need to recruit. Remember, Election Day is long – you will probably need 2-3 people to cover 1 polling place (if people will be taking breaks). When trying to cover as many places as possible with limited

volunteers, ask people to observe the polls during the busiest hours, before and after work, or during lunch hours.

### ***Time to recruit!***

Local Leagues will have the best resources and knowledge for what goes on at the polls, where volunteers are most needed, and even who the election observing volunteers are each year. An election observing program is a way to recruit new members, or involve members who have not been as active. Election observing is also a great way to engage with the community, promoting the work the League does year round while protecting the rights of voters through observing and documenting the voting process. Leagues across the country advocate year round for voter reforms and protecting the right to vote, and election observing is the last line of defense to ensure that no voter is disenfranchised.

- *Incentivize the program* – Work on creative ideas to get local Leagues involved in election observing. Tie in their local community work with the need to be present at the polls.
  - LWV Badges/shirts – Have volunteers make badges or t-shirts that display to all voters the local League’s name. This helps voters and election workers identify who you are while promoting the League in a non-disruptive way. Be sure you know in advance if your elections officials allow you to display the League logo/name.
  - An election observing program is one of the best ways to educate the public on changes to voting laws while at the same time provide a crucial service. While observing the voting process, League members and volunteers can have non-partisan election information available for voters who are confused or stopped from voting. Providing this information strengthens the League’s connection within the community.
- *Ask members to recruit friends, family and neighbors* – This might seem like a no-brainer (and Leagues do this all the time for general membership and events), but some people who would never think to register voters or come to a meeting might be willing to observe the polls before or after they cast their own vote.
  - Reach into wide and unlikely networks to bring in volunteers by asking members to go through their personal phone books. Election observing is an easy, but incredibly important, Election Day job that appeals to people with limited volunteering time. Have members think about people who have great attention to detail, patience and the ability to sit for extended periods of time.
- *Facebook and Social media* – Use local and statewide Facebook, Twitter, League websites and email lists to send out information about election observing. Make it as easy as possible for volunteers to sign up.
  - Trainings – schedule statewide webinars/conference calls as well as in-person trainings hosted by local Leagues. Make it as easy as possible for volunteers to get the information and resources they need. Often states will have training guidelines available that you will want to make available to any League volunteers. Trainings are a great way to bring new potential members into the League and encourage them to take the next step to becoming members.
  - Make an Election Day (and Early Voting) event on Facebook. You can also schedule trainings with all of the details for volunteers. Using Facebook also allows members to share your events with non-members who might be interested in volunteering but have not liked your page.





- Include sign-ups and information in your League updates/newsletters and on your website. Again, make sure all members and supporters know where to find information on election observing and any trainings you will offer. Encourage members and supporters to share all information with their networks.

## **Working with coalition members**

In some states, the majority of organizing work is already being done by other elections non-profits. If your League has worked with these organizations before, or if individual members have, coalition partners are a perfect way to reach more people by combining efforts. No one wants to show up on Election Day only to find out a partner organization has already sent a volunteer to watch the polls! Check with coalition partners to determine what is already being done, and where, and how you all can work together to make your state that much stronger.

### *Questions to consider*

- Who are the key players in the state?
- Is there an organization that does election observing training every election?
- What role can the state and local League's play in this project?
- How can you plug in members and volunteers?
- How can you ensure data sharing across coalition members?
- Are there areas of the state that no one is covering?
- What recognition will the League get for doing this work?

More than likely, you have been working with strong partners for years who have done election observing programs. Coordinating efforts is key to ensuring that the rights of as many voters as possible are protected.

## **What comes after the election?**

### *Gather data from volunteers*

Election Day and the days after can be chaotic, so having a plan in place will help your League stay organized. Gathering all Election Observer Forms from volunteers is crucial for League's to use and digest the observations made at the polls. Volunteers should have clear instructions on how to return all documentation, whether by email, in person or even in the mail. Depending on what happened on Election Day, some documents may be more time sensitive. For example, if an election observer has a long list of voters who voter provisional ballots and need to return with the proper ID for their vote to count, the League will want that list as soon as possible to help reach out to provisional voters. Letting all volunteers know ahead of Election Day where to return forms is crucial to ensuring your League has all the information that you need.

In addition to thinking through the physical data collection, make a plan for how the data will be stored and accessed for later use. Does your League have a central database? Who will record the information electronically? Where will the physical copies be stored? Who will have access to the information? How will the League gather information from coalition partners or share the information the League collected? Answering these questions ahead of time will make your post-election activities run much smoother!

### *Get feedback!*

Feedback is the best way to evaluate your program and make adjustments or improvements for the next election. All volunteers should be asked how they felt about election observing and for advice. To help get a higher response rate from volunteers, attach an evaluation form to their election observing documents. This way each volunteer can fill out the form and send it back along with their data.

Collecting feedback is the first step – discussing all positive and negative feedback with election observing organizers is key to improving the program in the future. Set a time a few weeks or months after the election to go through every evaluation form. Anyone who participated in the planning of your program should have a chance to read the evaluations and the option of being present at the discussion. Based on feedback, determine next steps and action items that your League can take for the next election.

### ***Plug in volunteers***

Volunteer election observers, both members and non-members, can be plugged in to local and state League activities shortly after the campaign. Reaching out to these volunteers within a few days or a week of the election to personally thank them is a good first step. Most of these volunteers will be excited to talk about their experiences and share their thoughts, and even frustrations, about their Election Day observations. Encourage Leagues to be creative when plugging these volunteers into the local activities.

- Provide volunteers with the opportunity to write guest blog posts on their election observing experience. These can be shared on your website and social media, or even through action alerts. All posts, of course, should be reviewed by the League first.
- Invite election observing volunteers to speak for 3-5 minutes about their Election Day experience at your next meeting. Hopefully they can inspire other League members to become election observers for the next election.
- Does your state have election laws that disenfranchise voters? Encourage election observers to write letters to the editor sharing their firsthand experience observing discrimination at the polls. Make sure no election observer divulges confidential voter information, but instead uses specific stories in a way that can educate the public about the harmful effects of bad election laws.
- Ask election observers to create their own group or committee to organize the efforts for the next election. Build on their personal experience and knowledge to have them recruit others, as well as come up with a schedule and training events.
- Sign up any non-members to join their local Leagues! Hopefully any non-members who volunteered with the League will be inspired to stay active and get involved. A great way to bring the voting process full circle is to ask election observer volunteers to help out with a local voter registration drive.

## Questions for Election Officials

Every state has different laws for conducting elections, from what times the polls are open to what forms of ID are necessary. Before you can begin training volunteers, find out your state's rules from your local election officials. Months before the election set-up a meeting with elections officials. Bring your list of questions with you, and ask for copies of their handbooks and internal guidance if possible.

### Election Observers

1. What are the rules for allowing people to observe at the polls?
  - a. Can poll workers record the process using audio or visual devices?
  - b. Do you require election observers to have specific badges or ID?
2. Did you have any difficulties with election observers in either 2012 or 2014? If so, what types of challenges did you have and how were they handled?
3. Do your chief elections inspectors (or the equivalent) need additional tools to deal with election observers?

### Voting Machines

1. What voting machines are you currently using? Do they differ between state/local and federal elections?
2. Do you have separate machines for use by voters with disabilities? If so, which type/manufacture?
3. Did you have voting machine problems in 2010/2012/2014? If so, what types of problems did you have and how extensive were the problems? What solutions do you plan for the upcoming election?

### Poll Workers

1. Did you have enough poll workers in 2012 to process people efficiently, assist people with disabilities, provide necessary language assistance and handle any problems that arose efficiently?
2. How many poll workers will you need for the next election? How many of these poll workers will be new, and how many will you need to recruit?
3. What do you pay your poll workers? Do you allow poll workers to work a half-day (split-shift)? If so, how many are full-day vs half-day? How does your compensation compare to surrounding communities?
4. Would it be easier or harder to have more split-shift workers?
5. Do you use high school students?
6. How can you reach out to the community (schools, businesses, civic organizations) to recruit additional poll workers? Can we help?
7. What training is required and or available and how frequently are poll workers required to attend training? Are they trained specifically on the use of provisional ballots?
8. If your jurisdiction has early voting or vote centers, how did these sites impact poll worker training and recruitment?
9. Will our League be able to receive a list of all poll workers and election judges prior to Election Day?

### Polling Places

1. Are poll workers equipped with electronic poll books so that they have access to the statewide voter registration database?
2. Do you need to establish new polling places for the next election? If so, will this involve any consolidation of polling places?
3. If there are changes, how will you inform voters to minimize Election Day confusion?
4. If your jurisdiction has early voting and/or vote centers, how did you determine where to place the voting sites and the hours of operation?

### Polling Day Activities

1. How do you handle absentee ballots on Election Day – do you open and count early, wait until the end of the day, or open and count when you have a chance?
2. How do you handle voters that requested an absentee ballot but appeared to vote in-person – e.g. not allowed to vote, may only vote provisional etc.?
3. Have you had to process provisional ballots? If so, how many were distributed in 2012 and how many were counted?
4. What were the primary reasons why voters were given a provisional ballot?
5. Have you had any challenged ballots? Have there been organized efforts to challenge voters in specific locations?
  - a. What are reasons someone can give to challenge a voter or ballot?
6. Do you think **your** training was adequate to handle Election Day activities? How about the training for Chief Election Inspectors (or the equivalent)? For poll workers?
7. If your jurisdiction has early voting or vote centers how did they impact Election Day – e.g. not as long lines, higher overall turnout, etc.?

### Provisional Ballots

1. What are the procedures for providing provisional ballots?
2. What are the procedures for determining whether to count a provisional ballot?
3. What are the reasons for casting a provisional ballot?
4. Is there adequate training of poll workers for this process?
5. Do you have partial count ballots for voters who are out of precinct or who can only vote in federal elections?
6. If someone votes a provisional ballot because of lack of ID, can they return at some point with proper ID to ensure their vote counts?

### ID Requirements (if necessary)

1. What type of training do poll workers receive to implement our state's ID requirements?
2. How would you assess the ID process in your jurisdiction in 2012/2014– e.g. ran smoothly, voters were confused, or poll workers were confused, etc.?
3. How many voters were not given a regular ballot because they did not have proper ID?

# LWVEF Election Observer Form

**Volunteer Name:**

**Polling place address/name:**

**Arrival Time:** **Departure Time:**

**Cell phone:** **Email:**

*NOTE: If you see the law being misapplied, or think you do, you can talk to the Poll Worker in charge. If the problem is not resolved, you can step outside the polling place and call XXX-XXX-XXXX.*

**INITIAL CHECK** (for those not arriving first, some may not apply)

Polling place accessible for people with disabilities	Y	N
Touch screen voting machine(s) are set up	Y	N
All voting machines start at zero	Y	N
All machines are set up for privacy	Y	N
All poll workers are present	Y	N
All tables are clearly marked and separated	Y	N
Election observers have a place to sit in the room	Y	N
Signs outside polling place clearly marked	Y	N
No visible electioneering in polling place	Y	N

**VOTING LINES**

Did the line of people waiting to vote ever exceed 15 people?	Y	N
Did anyone waiting to vote leave before voting?	Y	N

What did elections officials do to deal with long lines? Be specific.

**POLL WORKERS**

Impressions of how knowledgeable poll workers were with the law and with their jobs:



**VOTER INFORMATION** Record here the contact information for voters who were unable to vote and the reason why (such as insufficient ID, long wait, outside of precinct, provisional ballot, etc.). Be specific, including time and the poll worker involved (if known). Use back of sheet if necessary.

Name	Phone	Comments

**ELECTION PROTECTION NUMBER (GIVE TO ANY VOTER WHO IS UNABLE TO CAST A BALLOT):**

1-866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)  
1-888-VE-Y-VOTA (en Español)  
1-888-API-VOTE (Asian multilingual assistance)

## Additional Resources

[Election Assistance Commission Guide for Poll Workers](#)

[LWVUS Questions for State Elections Boards](#)

[LWVWI Poll Observer Program Guides](#) – Real Life Examples, Questions for Election Officials and Election Observer forms have been partially adapted from League of Women Voters of Wisconsin 2012 Convention Caucus, which can be found on the League Management site.

[\*NCSL and Carter Center resource coming soon!\*](#)

For more information or help with Election Observer Programs in your state, please contact Cynthia Sebian-Lander, Public Advocacy for Voter Protection Project Specialist, at [CSebianLander@lww.org](mailto:CSebianLander@lww.org).