

**A Project of the**

**League of Women Voters Young People Taskforce**

*The Young People Task Force (YPTF) was created as a collaborative effort between LWVUS President Elisabeth MacNamara and LWVUS staff in response to the Leagues’ desire to attract the next generation of League leaders. The YPTF’s mission is to seek ways to increase the LWV long-term membership sustainability by recruiting the next generation of League members.*

*The YPTF was created with these three distinct goals in mind:*

* *Gathering information about why young people join the League of Women Voters*
* *Creating resources for local Leagues to directly recruit and engage young people in their communities*
* *Creating a community for young professional League members (and utilizing this community to help move the League into the 21st century*

*The YPTF is currently comprised of:*

* *2 Co-Chairs: Melissa Currence (LWV of the Cincinnati Area, OH) and Amy Hjerstedt (LWV of Michigan)*
* *3 Members: T.J. Leavell (LWV of North Carolina), Alice Giles (LWV of Howard County, MD) and Karen Oelschalaeger (LWV of Asheville-Buncombe County, NC)*

*Ad-Hoc Members of the YPTF include:*

* *2 currently sitting LWVUS Board Members: Mary Klenz and Anne Schink*
* *2 currently sitting* [*LWVUS Ruth S. Shur Fellows*](http://www.lwv.org/content/meet-ruth-s-shur-fellows)*: Eva Rogers and Penney Van Vleet*

*The responsibilities of the YPTF member consist of:*

* *Participating in monthly Task Force conference calls to plan and discuss achieving the goals above*
* *Collaborating on a regular basis to gather information and create resources for local Leagues to recruit and engage young people (could include interviewing young people, developing materials, collecting success stories from local Leagues who effectively reach out to young people already)*
* *Participating in quarterly phone calls with League leaders from the LWV Young People Facebook Group and LWVUS President Elisabeth MacNamara*

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**How this RESOURCE came together**

Before creating this document, the LWVUS Young People Task Force (YPTF) asked many questions, read books and articles, participated in conference calls and webinars, and conducted online research for clues as to what makes young people tick and how best to engage them in our organization. In our exploration, we conducted some unscientific polls and questionnaires on Facebook and via email, and interviewed various Local Leagues that were successful with membership increases in recent years. We also spoke with individuals at college campuses, libraries, companies who tend to promote volunteerism, and other membership and volunteer organizations. Lastly, we interviewed ourselves. Since the five-member task force is comprised of young League leaders, who value and admire the League of Women Voters (LWV) and its work, we thought, who better to interview than the die-hard young LWV members themselves.

This document is the first in a series of resources that the Task Force will make available to League leaders through [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org), webinar presentations and other venues. These will include more success stories, concrete best practices for recruitment, and more information about utilizing technology. Watch the weekly Leaders’ Update for more information in the coming months!

**Now is the Time**

The League of Women Voters, the organization that unites us in both mission and friendship, is facing a challenge common to many other membership and volunteer organizations: our membership is not steadily growing, nor is it reflective of the diversity of our communities.

In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Robert D. Putnam brought the recruitment and retention challenge to the forefront. He illustrated how strong and enduring organizations, like the League of Women Voters, are facing an uphill battle (in terms of growing and diversifying membership) because of issues such as dual-career parents, increased television viewing, changes in values around wanting to volunteer, and longer work schedules and commutes.[[1]](#footnote-1) As “social capital” has declined over the decades, our organization, through its strong social networking and common core values in volunteering, has also lost some of its vigor and strength in membership recruitment efforts. [[2]](#footnote-2) As the organization has matured, our membership numbers dwindled. Our local League numbers across the country are not as robust as decades ago, yet our work remains central to the challenges facing our democracy, the League remains a critical voice at the local, state and national levels, and hundreds of partners continue to flock to the League in major election years. By adopting new tactics and expanding opportunities for interested individuals to get involved with the League, we have the opportunity to maintain and even increase our effectiveness.

The LWVUS Young People Task Force’s mission is to help local League leaders by sparking an interest in this important cause of recruiting the next generation of League members, igniting an ongoing dialogue among our volunteers and leaders and creating resources to assist local Leagues in recruiting the next generation of League leaders.

**We are at a defining time right now.** Quite simply, our democracy needs us. To continue to foster the important and thoughtful discussions on complex societal and political issues that League has built its more than 90-year reputation upon, the League needs a membership that is reflective of our communities. And, therefore, it is necessary to bring in new and young people. Many Leagues have become comfortable in their routine and their tempo; however, in order for the League to become sustainable, energetic and have resonance beyond 2020, we must mix things up and try new techniques. We need to get out of our comfort zone and go to where the young people are. By demonstrating our value to new audiences, we can seize this opportunity to understand what drives today’s youth and then use that information to adapt and engage young prospective volunteers and future members. This can help strengthen our organization far into the future.

**Young people share the same concerns as our “senior” League members.** The issues cut across the generations: the passion for fighting is not clustered around one generation or one issue. Young and established members all understand there is work to do, and that we all share a responsibility to get involved and make our democracy work. There are still many causes to carry out in our organization, and young people have specific talents and energy the League can harness to create a more diverse discussion and one that incorporates more creative ideas and possible solutions. Spicing up our organization with more young people, and people from different backgrounds, will make us stronger and more approachable to future members as well as be a dynamic force for dealing with issues as they surface in our communities.

**Success means more than numbers.** Success should not be defined by recruiting a significant number of young people at a single event or by a specified deadline. Furthermore, recruiting a single or “token” member of a younger generation does not represent success. Rather, adapting our approach to membership recruitment to intentionally engage other generations should define success. Much like the Membership and Leadership Development (MLD) program, it is about sharpening our message about the League’s value and how we deliver that message to engage new groups to join the League. For example, as our society becomes more mobile and connected, the League must also adapt in order to reach out and seek involvement of students, professionals, and community activists in the important work of the League of Women Voters. The League must understand what motivates today’s busy and tech-savvy people to join political organizations and must adapt our recruitment techniques to welcome prospective members.

There are hundreds of organizations all vying for the same pool of young volunteers, yet the **League stands out as an ideal choice** because of our work, our reputation and our network of smart, dedicated volunteers. We can provide young people skills and opportunities to make a positive impact in their communities, develop important leadership skills, network with leaders, gain work experience, and experience personal growth. We can find creative ways to let young members use their skills to help our local Leagues. Younger members have unique talents that can assist us with research and other projects. By incorporating their skills, we can multiply our impact on our communities and our democracy. Additionally, the younger generations also will help us reach more citizens faster and more effectively, so that we may continue to improve and expand our voter service projects and advocacy work. We need their help, and, as you will see, they need and want ours.

**‘Young People’ - how is this defined?**

In our research, the YPTF was often confronted with the question: What is the age of a ‘young person?’ While 40 and 60 years old may be considered young in many local Leagues, we had to ask ourselves what age group would help keep the LWV sustainable past 2020 and beyond? The Baby Boomers are certainly an extraordinary generation, ready to volunteer and share their talents, and many are already familiar with the League. However, **young people, from high school age to mid-thirties are not familiar with the LWV name or reputation, therefore, this is the group we want to engage and educate about the League**. The YPTF heard this discouraging information several times when asking high school and college students about their familiarity with our organization. If the students knew our name (which as it turns out many have not), they associated us only with the women’s suffrage movement (i.e., something historic – of the past). And, this idea was repeated in some of the focus group work that LWVUS did almost two years ago.

From our questions to various people around the country, **Generation X** (or GenX) and Millennials do not know who we are. (See below for definitions of these groups.) These two rising groups of young people, numbering over 120 million, are America’s future leaders. It is our goal to help give more information and tools to local Leagues on how to reach and recruit these potential and members into our organization so that we continue to serve voters of all generations.

**Who are these young prospective members?** GenX, according to Brinkerhoff’s book, *Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit*, were born between 1963 and 1980.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are roughly 45 million GenXers, and this group is considered “independent, self-reliant, [has a] desire for stability, and [enjoys] informality and fun,” notes Brinkerhoff.[[4]](#footnote-4) Further, he points out when working with GenX, they “value” their work with an organization and “independent thinking” as well as “work-life balance.”[[5]](#footnote-5) More importantly, this generation is “very focused on their career path, even in early employment.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This is great news for the League! We have a lot to offer GenXers in the way of leadership development, networking, civic education and work experience, just to name a few.

Like GenX, **Millennials** (known by other names as GenY, Generation Me, Gen@) are also confident and interested in work-life balance.[[7]](#footnote-7) This generation born in 1981 and through 2002 is wired and connected to the Internet. Additionally, as Brinkerhoff discusses, **Millennials** have a strong sense of “social commitment.”[[8]](#footnote-8) **Millennials** are uniquely interested in volunteering in their communities.[[9]](#footnote-9) This generation is volunteering in greater numbers than any other generation, as Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* illustrates.[[10]](#footnote-10) Besides already engaging in civics, Brinkerhoff adds how **Millennials** are also expert at networking, “superb time managers,” “complete[ly] comfortable with technology,” and very comfortable with diversity.[[11]](#footnote-11) An interesting caveat about **Millennials** is they come to an organization when they know there will be other young people participating. This generation is social and responds best with peer pressure to get them in the door to volunteer.[[12]](#footnote-12) If we can tune into their social needs, then this generation is a great match for the League—they have a lot to offer our ranks and they are already eager to help their communities!

**These two generations are looking for ways to stand out among their peers, contribute to society, and continue to grow personally and professionally**. The League has the foundation and mission to offer these young people what they are looking for and working towards. The difficult task for us is to reach them. But, how? We have to *go where they are* and demonstrate to them what the benefit is to becoming involved in the tangible and effective work being carried out by our organization. To do this we have to communicate in an interesting and fun way, and show how our work relates to them and will be more impactful with their help. Our strength is our mission, stability, reputation, reliability and good work. Our challenge is moving to the next step in our recruitment efforts.

***Who Are We Really Talking About?***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Greatest**  **Generation** | **Silent**  **Generation** | | **Baby**  **Boomers** | | **Generation X**  **(GenX)** | | **Gen@**  **(Millennials, GenY,**  **Me Generation)** | |
| **Born** | 1901-1924 | | 1925-1945 | | 1946-1962 | | 1963-1980 | | 1981-2002 | |
| **Size of Population** | 20 million | 30 million | | 80 million | | 45 million | | 75 million | |
| **Key Events** | Both high times and the Great Depression, New Deal, WWII, strongest economy ever in US | | 1950s politics and social policies, military draft, Cold War, social stability and family unity, Vietnam War and Watergate | | Huge social change, but in a wealthy nation, often overindulged by their parents, Cold War scare, rebel against government—first time for U.S. in 200 years, significant changes in scientific and cultural institutions | | Worked in the shadows of the Boomers—in many cases, held back because Boomers population size and their refusal to retire. GenXers are interested in stability, but that does not translate into the idea of staying with one organization. | | High-tech society, Completely connected to the Internet, civic minded, even more than their parents, has a value structure that includes lifelong learning, and a work-life balance. More than any other generation in U.S., they are wired for collaboration and for working in groups. | |
| **Key Values** | Financial security, patriotism, belief in power of institutions, respect for authority, selflessness | | Loyalty, self-sacrifice stoicism, faith institutions, intense patriotism | | Sense of entitlement, optimism, cynicism about institutions, competition, focused on career, endless youth | | Independence, self-reliance, desire for stability, informality, fun | | Work-life balance, confidence, social commitment, *complete* comfort with technology, networking, realism, well-informed, *superb* time manages | |
| **Technology Changes** | Rural electrification, commercial radio | | Automobile ownership, use of office “machines,” and massive industrialization | | Television ownership | | Rise of the personal computer, cable TV, and video games | | The connection between the personal computer and the Internet, with an added dose of the rapid pace of technological advances and innovation. | |
| **Focus On** | Tradition, helping others, being part of a large-scale, valuable change | | Tradition, loyalty to a key issue in their lives, value of joint work ethic | | Their value to the team, your need for them, their ability to improve your services, that; your place is young and “cool.” Publicly recognize them whenever possible. Tell them that they can help “change the world” by working with you. | | Their value to the work of the organization, the value of independent thinking, your organization’s focus on work-life balance. | | The good that they *and* their peers can do by working with you, the challenge of doing good in the community and doing it well, the need for their new perspective and ideas. | | |

Reprinted with permission from *Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit* (Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2007), 12-14.

**Branding makes us stronger**

Many members have found when they talk to young people, they know nothing about the League of Women Voters, but usually, once we share what the League is about, they are hungry for our information and excited by our mission.

How will the future generations come to know the League of Women Voters? We believe a major key to success would be through a united front at the local, state and national level that ties the important work together of all levels of League. Many of us joined the League because a mother or grandmother or aunt who was a member inspired us to join. As each generation passes, we cannot count on this oral tradition to grow our ranks. Now, **we must prioritize the importance of promoting the League of Women Voters brand**, so younger people know us.

These days, everyone is bombarded with advertisements, catalogues, status updates and email of all kinds. So many organizations and businesses are scrambling for our attention. Making the League stand out among the millions of these other messages is a challenge.

We hope Leagues keep in mind this overwhelming amount of information when working on gaining and keeping young people as members. Young people, especially, are used to this onslaught of messages, but they also great at ignoring organizations with which they are not yet familiar. If we want younger members to join the League, we are most likely going to **need to focus first on awareness** before young people test us out, learn to trust us and then accept and join us.

You know best how your League can connect to your community and connect to the other levels of the League. Talk with your leadership about ways your League can appeal directly to young people. Remember you need to **tailor your approach** depending on who you are trying to reach.[[13]](#footnote-13) Asking those who you are trying to reach what they want from your League is a great start.

The YPTF materials (to be released in the coming months) will help Leagues bridge the generational divide and provide concrete examples of ways to start engaging young people. All people want to be part of an organization that reflects who they are and what they stand for. We believe more young people will want to be part of the League once they know about us!

**What Motivates Young People to Join the LWV?**

As the League continues its important work in advocacy and voter service, we have a need to bring new faces and talents to our organization. **Younger generations have unique qualities that will help us move our causes further faster.** Additionally as our organization, ages it is imperative we reach out to this energetic, enthusiastic and talented pool of prospective volunteers. They need the experience, skill sets and volunteer hours, and they have the passion, interest, commitment and we need their creative thinking and commitment to our mission. It is time we consider the younger generations and their motivations for joining organizations.

Besides the personal connections made when people work together on a project, many younger volunteers and advocates enjoy the satisfaction of affecting change as part of a team. Volunteers of all ages appreciate recognition for their efforts. **Opportunities for recognition**, especially made publicly, are another tool for recruiting students and professionals.

**League Involvement as Career Skill-Building**

Today’s young people look at volunteering differently than older generations because of today’s job market. After the Dot Com bubble burst and the Great Recession in 2007 created economic turmoil, today’s young workers experience both fewer jobs and careers that will carry them into retirement with dependable wages, job security, health insurance and retirement benefits. Further, because of the priority placed on higher education and job experience, young people face stiff competition since many are equally qualified with various degrees, internships and volunteer projects in their repertoire. Finding an enjoyable and challenging career that pays well and is easily attainable is not the job market of today.

Recent high school and college graduates as well as people changing careers need to meet certain prerequisites for serious consideration in the hiring process. Young people today are *résumé builders*: they must constantly think of how a particular experience, responsibility or new adventure will look to a prospective employer. Knowing how today’s youth must present themselves so they can compete with other prospective job applicants is one way the League can recruit young people.

**The League has many skills to offer students and career seekers.** Our organization should promote our strengths when we coordinate membership events since they are both résumé-perfect and appealing to young professionals. Leadership, teambuilding, teamwork, fundraising, research, writing, public speaking, using technology, networking and interviewing are just a few routine activities the League conducts every day. Combine these skills with our ongoing missions to advocate our well-researched positions and to register and educate voters, the League is a sound choice for anyone looking to add to their skill set while making a real impact.

We can provide young members with the opportunity to develop expertise in an area of public policy that may build their portfolio in a new direction. Furthermore, because our reputation and nonpartisan political conduct attracts leaders in the community, our organization is a valuable place for people to connect and build their networks and find potential career information and experience.

Altruism is still an important value among volunteers, and young people, like other age groups, also possess this important belief. Yet regardless of an implicit commitment to our mission and work, we must still make the sell to get young people involved in our work. Young people are striving to grow their careers, raise their families, and enjoy their leisure time. Volunteering in a complex organization with multifaceted missions and positions, such as the League, is overwhelming for people already spread thin and inundated with information. The League needs to stand out, be flexible, and be creative to help reach out and accommodate people who are involved elsewhere.

The League offers opportunities for members to grow both professionally and personally. Professionally, the League offers leadership experience and behind-the-scenes government education for anyone looking to get involved in the political process. While participating in projects that promote and advocate for good government, **League members share networking, community bonding, and camaraderie, which contributes to the many young people’s desire to connect and grow in a way that promotes friendship and belonging.** Thus, when members enjoy and have fun in the projects they promote and participate in, prospective volunteers experience a sense of commitment, loyalty and ownership in the organization.

**Reasons why our younger members joined LWV**

When asked why they joined, this is what our younger members said:

* *For opportunity to lead others and learn*
* *Education and experience in government, politics, and policy*
* *Be part of a community and to influence change*
* *Have a direct voice in government*
* *Influence policy and advocate for/against issues*
* *To move away from partisan politics, mudslinging, and towards deliberative dialogue and civility*
* *Personal growth*
* *Networking*
* *Log volunteer hours (some workplaces give perks to employees for volunteering in their community)*
* *To be part of the organization that creates the Voter Guides*
* *To get out of the house and have some ‘me time’!*
* *Make friends*
* *To have fun!*
* *To put an organization membership on a résumé*
* *To be part of the organization that conducts candidate forums*
* *Networking, experience, responsibilities, inexpensive education—all this for only the cost of membership!*

**Case Studies**

**LWV of South Bend Area, IN**

The League of Women Voters of the South Bend Area has had success in recruiting younger members and engaging young people through voter service activities.

* **Visible Youth-Oriented Work:** The South Bend League has participated in the LWVUS High School Voter Registration Project, putting volunteers in front of hundreds of young people in the community and making a memorable mark. They expect this program to build and expand to more schools in future years, thus perpetuating the League’s lasting impact.
* **Embracing Young Leaders**: The Board of Directors is of varying ages. The co-presidents are both in their 40s and directors range from late 30s mid-70s. Once you have a younger presence in your League, it tends to attract more of the same. Young people have a seat at the table, are respected, and have the opportunity to make a lasting impact through successful programs.
* **Embracing Technology**: The South Bend League has made technology updates a priority, starting with their website and social media. Without a dynamic, up-to-date website, you cannot effectively serve voters or recruit dynamic young members.

**LWV of Larimer County, CO**

The League of Women Voters of the Larimer County has leveraged its important work to engage young volunteers—and provide lasting professional skills!

* **Being Visible in the Community**: Larimer County joined other Colorado Leagues in participating in VOTE411’s popular online voter guide system, thus ensuring the League’s name and important work reached many online information-seekers. The Larimer County League even managed to have VOTE411 ads placed on local buses!
* **Meaningful Youth Volunteer Recruitment**: One of the major employers in the area sponsored a volunteer fair in order to encourage staff to volunteer in the community. The League was one of many nonprofits invited to participate. The League made a list of short-term, immediate tasks that volunteers could take on and complete. The list included web design and presenting pro/con ballot issues to requesting groups before national elections.

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1. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* and Robert Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter C. Brinkerhoff, *Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit* (Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2007), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter C. Brinkerhoff, *Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit* (Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2007), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Brinkerhoff, *Generations*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Note: While both generations of young people will bring valuable contributions to the League, the YP Task Force is focusing its research and ideas for recruitment mainly on Millennials since their group seems most often unaware of the League and its ongoing work in the political process.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)