

Observer Corps Toolkit

*Protecting Voters and Democracy by Observing
Our Government in Action*



(SOURCE: [HTTPS://WWW.LWVPALOALTO.ORG/OBSERVER-CORPS](https://www.lwvpaloalto.org/observer-corps))

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Chapter 1: The Basics: What is an Observer Corps and why is it important?

Observer Corps Description

A functioning democracy thrives when there is active participation and people have access to how government works, how laws are made, and how to share insight and information. People have a right to know how our government works, along with access to public records, resources, and meetings.

Public participation is an active ingredient in the democratic process. When voters are engaged with the ins and outs of how our government functions, they get a deeper level of understanding. From operations to how decisions are made at each level of government, we can aid in building awareness about what it takes for our government to function efficiently.

As part of civic engagement and civic responsibility, governments adhere to sunshine laws, which are laws that require government officials to make public meetings and public records available for open, public, and transparent observation and scrutiny. These laws protect citizens' rights to know how their government operates. Ultimately, adherence to sunshine laws promotes increased civic activation, transparency, accountability, and understanding of how government functions.

Purpose

Observer Corps ensure that the public is made aware of the decisions that are made by government. They hold our elected officials and democratic institutions accountable and promote transparency in government. Observers who take action consistently and effectively can raise the League's profile and visibility, which increases our overall impact of empowering voters and defending democracy.



Goals

The overarching goal of an Observer Corps is to monitor governmental meetings and take note of issues of importance that coincide with the work of the League. It's imperative that Observer Corps members are trained and arrive at their meeting promptly. Observer Corps are the eyes and ears of the League on the ground; they should be keen, active listeners, and take note of the flow of the meeting. Just as important as Corps members being observant during meetings is the reporting that takes place after the meeting has ended. Corps members should take diligent notes and report back on the proceedings of the meeting, to take stock of information that aligns with the League's principles and to take note if the governing body is not acting in alignment with established policies and procedures.

When League members observe their government, their findings can elevate awareness on issues and spark solutions toward established League positions. Trust is built when the League shares institutional knowledge and expertise with the community that anchors education, mobilization, civic engagement, and empowerment. When Observer Corps members are up close and personal with issues, they can better inform their Leagues on a range of topics including voter education and a variety of advocacy initiatives.

Who Can Be an Observer

Any League member can be an observer. Observers are detail-oriented, patient, and consistent with observing meetings and offering reports.

Time Commitment

The time commitment required for this position is flexible, as it is dependent on what the League member would like to get out of the process. You can either track one bill, which would require attending the committees that it goes through, or the entire committee, which would require attending multiple committee meetings per week. Administrative boards usually meet once a month for 2 to 3 hours. It is up to individual members for what they would like to monitor and how much.

Code of Conduct

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1. Abide by the rules of the League as set out in its [Bylaws](#), [Mission Statement](#), and [Shared Values](#)

2. Do not commit the League to any action without prior approval by your League president or president's designee
 3. Act with integrity, respect, and professionalism
 4. Act within the bounds of the setting you are in
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Unified Voice Policy: Public vs. Individual Voices and Capacities

When testifying or providing public comment in an individual capacity, be sure to state that you are not speaking on behalf of any organization. Members should not state that they are a League member if testifying in an individual capacity. However, they *can* state that they were informed about issues by the League.

Generally, the League leadership, like state or local League Presidents, can provide public comment on behalf of the League unless other members are authorized to do so by their League's president.

Chapter 2: Where can you observe?



(<https://www.lwvchampaigncounty.org/observer-corps.html>)

Administrative Boards vs. Legislative Committees

You have the opportunity to observe either administrative or legislative boards. Administrative boards are often panels of community leaders, experts, and others who are knowledgeable and/or have stake in a particular issue. These boards exist on the city, county, and state level. Legislative committees are comprised of legislators who debate, amend, and vote on policy. There are multiple committees per legislature on the state level. Some committees are open to the public, and meeting times and locations will be posted online or in the meeting building. We strongly encourage Leagues to



observe board of election meetings (or your state/county equivalent), as these are where voters' ballots can be challenged.

Types of Meetings Observed

State Leagues	Local Leagues
Legislative Session	City or town council meetings
Legislative Committees	School board meetings
County Commissioner Court meetings	Zoning board meetings
Board of Elections meetings	Hospital District Boards
	County Utility Boards

Preparation for Meetings

Be sure to do research on the members of the board/committee and the issues/bills they are discussing before you attend. This will help you contextualize what you observe at the meeting and allow you to take more informed notes. Acquaint yourself with the technology, food and drink, and other policies of the meeting you are observing.

Finding Where to Observe: Subscribing to Mailing Lists

It can sometimes be difficult to find the times and locations that boards and committees meet. Be sure to check out government websites to find a list of the boards or committees that meet and join their listservs, where information is sent out. If you cannot find this, contact them at the email address or phone number listed.

What to Bring

Make sure to bring a notepad and pen/pencil or a laptop (if digital notes are allowed). Be sure to bring or wear LWV-branded merchandise like a button or lapel pin. If allowed, bring water and snacks in case the meeting runs overtime.



Attending Meetings

When attending meetings, arrive promptly at the start of the meeting and observe any rules of engagement when it comes to entering the meeting chambers. Take a seat that is comfortable and in the line of sight with the speakers, usually in a designated seating area for the public. Do not talk during the meeting, as often the room can echo what you are saying. If you need to talk, whisper very quietly. Be sure to turn your phone off or put it on silent mode.

If there is time and space to introduce yourself to the board or committee, do so respectfully and responsibly. Observers maintain an impartial, respectful, and professional attitude. Be sure to talk about LWV to other members of the public before or after the meeting.

Things to Listen for

Listen for the agenda items discussed, questions or statements made by members and the public, if there were any debates or disagreement, if there were any other topics discussed, the outcome of the bill or topic discussed, etc.

What to Look for

Pay attention to references made by the board or committee to understand the context in which they are discussing matters. Look at body language and the facial expressions of the members to understand the feelings around the topic being discussed.

Taking Notes

Take notes that capture the nature of what was discussed at the meeting. Remember, you are the eyes and the ears of the League while attending. And although you will not directly engage in public comments, take full awareness of all that is happening at the meeting. You can reference the Observer Corps report form (listed in the Appendix) as a guide for your notetaking. The Observer Corps Report form includes a full breakdown of all the components you should be aware of while attending the meeting. The more detailed information that you include in the notes, the more helpful it will be for follow-up actions.

Etiquette



Observers should acknowledge and adhere to all rules of the governing body over the meeting they are observing. Observers should remain quiet and respectful while observing the meeting. All of the rules of the governing body should be upheld, and observers are to remain as the “flies on the wall” during the meeting.

Verbal Etiquette

Communicate with others in a respectful and professional manner. Observers are generally not authorized to speak for the League of Women Voters on legislative issues. However, an Observer may state facts that they know and that are generally known to the public. If speaking in an individual capacity, do not state your affiliation with the League, rehearse your testimony, introduce yourself, speak clearly into the microphone, speak to the chair, and thank the chair and members.

Dressing Etiquette

Dressing in standard business casual meeting attire is recommended, along with a League pin or button, unless you are speaking as an individual. Do not wear politically aligned clothing and conform to the dress code requirements of the particular governing body or agency you are observing.

Chapter 3: Observer recruitment

Attracting volunteers

Being an observer is a great way for new League members to play an active role in their community. Whether they have just moved to their city or town or would like to understand the mechanics of how local governing bodies work, joining the observer corps introduces the work of the League in a significant way.

Whether volunteers only have a few moments here and there, or they want to participate in an on-going basis, the League’s observer corps can be adaptable. Observers often have the flexibility to join meetings virtually or in-person. Every bit of time spent in meetings is an opportunity to learn what your government is doing and ensure that meetings are clear and accessible to all.

Recruitment planning

Planning for recruitment and training of volunteers is an essential part of a successful observer corps. Prepare a recruitment and training calendar to reference when starting



your recruitment efforts. Host recruitment meetings to explain what is expected of observers and answer any questions about the process.

Create a database of volunteers and identify veteran observers who can mentor new observers on best practices. Share the experiences of active observers to inspire first-time observers to join in. Tell stories of why observing matters, what the impacts of observing are, and how these efforts align with defending democracy. Use active observers to personally invite volunteers to participate throughout the year rather than during a once-a-year recruitment campaign.

Recruitment methods

Publicize your recruitment plan in newsletters, on social media, and on your League website. Connect with partner organizations to recruit volunteers that might be interested in working together as observers. Ask observers to activate their role as trusted messengers to engage friends, family, and neighbors to expand the network of volunteers.

Craft a call to action that is short and promotes volunteers to take the next step to join their observer corps. Promote multiple ways to get involved and keep in mind that observers will have different availability, skills, and interests. Offer a variety of opportunities to support the observer corps program. Highlight observers' issue-based efforts to focus on the special interests of prospective volunteers.

Chapter 4: Reporting your observations

How to Report Your Observations

Just as important as it is to observe the meeting, reporting your observations is just as critical. After the close of the meeting, gather your notes and submit them to your state or local League's advocacy arm. Be sure that your reports are reflective, thorough, and make note of details that happened during the meeting. A report template and public accessibility checklist is included in the index of this toolkit.

Chapter 5: Sharing your observations

How to share your reports

To amplify the impact of your observations, share a summary of your reports with the community to educate and advocate for improved access to and confidence in how decisions are made.

Share your reports with members, partner organizations, and the media to emphasize the impact of observing and the role it plays in your League. Highlight photos of observers in action to accompany your report. Use social media to leverage the outcomes of your report to call for accountability and transparency.

Create a media-facing version of your report and feature the important topline. Share your findings with traditional media outlets, newspapers, online news outlets, and local independent television and radio stations. Have a member write a letter to the editor on their experience as an observer. Use your report as a tool to teach the public what democracy means in their everyday life. Educate your community with the information you find, host a podcast, create a civic engagement video series, include your report in a monthly League newsletter, or feature it on your League's website.

Chapter 6: Making further recommendations



[\(https://www.lwvmn.org/\)](https://www.lwvmn.org/)

How to Synthesize Your Notes?

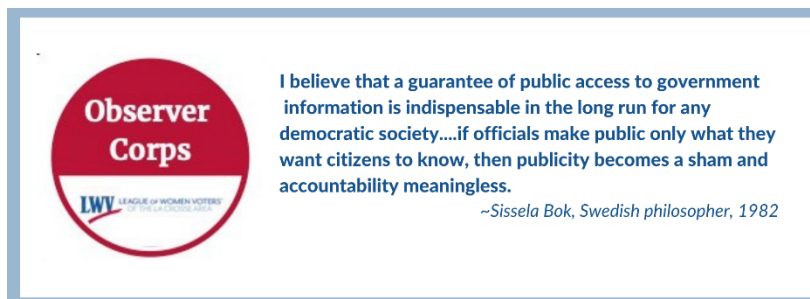
It is important to summarize your notes into key takeaways to include in your final report. Prioritize the key pieces of information from your notes and transfer those elements to your report. Identify which information was most important or talked about

the most during the meeting and use that information as an anchor for the rest of the report.

Use the reporting form as a guide to synthesize all of the information.

Additionally, use the final sections of the report to share any other key information that may have not been pertinent to the report but is valuable context. Add recommendations about any follow-up action you suggest that your League undertake. Be sure to include key information that went into your recommendation.

Chapter 7: Best practices to get you started



https://www.lwvlacrosse.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=484247&module_id=479891

Getting Aligned Across Your League

Prior to kicking off your observer corps year, have a discussion with your League about boards or committees of interest with the purpose of identifying issues that would be helpful to follow and learn more about. Get aligned on the purpose of your observer corps, what meetings observers can attend and how often, and any items other League committees or board members flag for special observation.

What's next?



After you submit your report, the Advocacy Vice President or President will review your submission. If you have any questions or need to make any changes to your report please email your advocacy team directly.

Examples

- [LWV of Minnesota's Observer & Lobby Corp](#)

Appendix:

Observer Report Form

Click the link below to download the Observer Report Form. The form is available as both an editable Word document for reporters to write notes and thoughts in real time and printable PDF to handwrite notes.

[CLICK TO DOWNLOAD: OBSERVER REPORT FORMS](#)

Observer Corps Checklists

Open Meeting Law Checklist

[Click here](#) to automatically download the open meeting law checklist (Word document).

Public Accessibility Checklist

[Click here](#) to download the public accessibility checklist (Word document).

Lingo and Know How

Videos/Resources

The League of Women Voters of Minnesota has helpful videos that explain what an observer does and how they report: <https://www.lwvmn.org/observer-lobby-corps>.



The League of Women Voters of the Spokane Area has this helpful guide:

https://my.lwv.org/sites/default/files/leagues/wysiwyg/%5Bcurrent-user%3Aog-user-node%3A1%3Atitle%5D/lwvsa_observer_corp_guidelinesfaqs.pdf.

Legislative Lingo

COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATOR (CA) – a partisan staff member assigned to coordinate for the committee, draft the minutes of the committee, and assist the Chair with running the committee hearing

COMPANION BILL – when a bill is introduced in either legislative chamber, the chief author may find someone to carry a bill in the other chamber; this bill is usually identical when introduced, though that may change

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE – a committee appointed to reconcile the difference between two versions of a bill that has been passed by both the House and Senate

DELETE ALL AMENDMENT – also known as a Delete Everything Amendment, this amendment removes the entire language of a bill or amendment and substitutes new language, rather than making small changes

ENGROSSMENT – the current text of a bill or resolution which includes or incorporates all adopted amendments; each version will receive a numerical designation (e.g., first engrossment, second engrossment, etc.)

ENROLLMENT – a bill that has been passed by both houses and has been put in final form to be presented to the governor for his signature

LAID OVER – indicates a bill is not defeated or passed by a committee, but is “held” by a committee; usually indicates that the bill, or sections of it, may be included in an omnibus bill to be drafted at a later date

LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT (LA) – a partisan staff member assigned to provide administrative support to a legislator or legislators

LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR (LD) – a partisan staff member who drafts legislation for a legislator or legislators. Legislative directors lead the legislative agenda for members of a legislative body.

PAGE – the nonpartisan staff member assigned to provide assistance to Committee Administrators, manage testifiers, ensure that the committee hearing is being recorded, courier documents, and run errands for legislators and legislative staff



SELECT COMMITTEE – a temporary committee established for a specific purpose

SESSION – has multiple meanings: (1) BIENNIUM SESSION: the two-year legislative cycle; (2) ANNUAL SESSION or REGULAR SESSION: the weeks between the first day of assembly and the adjournment in each calendar; (3) DAILY SESSION or FLOOR SESSION: when either legislative body meets as a whole in its main chamber; (4) SPECIAL SESSION: an extra session outside the usual annual session that is called by the governor

TABLED – indicates a bill or motion has not received a voter and may be reconsidered at a later time or date by the same committee or board

How to find bills on Legislative Websites

STEP 1

Open your internet browser to your state's Legislature website

STEP 2

Check the schedule to ensure that the meeting you are attending is still happening. Choose from a date on the calendar

STEP 3

Locate your meeting date from the list. Be sure that the meeting is still happening and be aware of any cancellation notices or schedule updates before going to the meeting

STEP 4

Download the agenda and/ or committee documents associated with your meeting, if available

STEP 5

Return to the home page of the Legislature website and locate the "Bill look-up" section

STEP 6

Conduct a search for the appropriate House or Senate bill

STEP 7

Enter the bill number in the search field and read up on the bill status and committee information

