

## SUSTAINABILITY BACKGROUND

LWVCO 09/09/09

### Sustainability—What Is It?

Sustainability has many definitions, all having a common theme: meeting the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Recognizing the nature and complexity of the interdependence of the earth's systems and its inhabitants is fundamental to understanding the concept and for evaluating what is and what is not sustainable behavior. Sustainability is understood to refer to conditions that promote a healthy, safe, and economically secure environment for people and all living things, and that do not exceed the limits of the earth to renew itself.

The concept of sustainability is inherent in LWV positions, an unspoken presumption underlying many positions. The need to be sustainable is not new, nor is League's recognition of its importance. What is *new* is using the word "sustainability" as an umbrella term to represent League's positions.

The principle of sustainability is fundamental to League concerns and League positions tend to support sustainability implicitly rather than explicitly. Sustainability is a concept that applies to all levels of League, and the concept is implicit in League *Principles*. League positions often speak of preservation and conservation, of stewardship, of considering long-term benefits and meeting future needs.

Sustainability refers to the dynamic among ecological, economic, and social systems on a global scale. It demands consideration of the interactions among positions in different program areas. Principles of sustainability are reflected in most program areas, usually implicitly rather than explicitly. For example:

With respect to **government**, positions support policies that promote equity, flexibility, and responsibility so that democratic government is encouraged and protected.

With respect to **natural resources**, positions support protection and wise management in the public interest to promote an environment beneficial to life.

With respect to **social policy**, positions promote the equity, justice, education, healthcare, and housing essential to a sustainable society.

### **Using League Positions**

In focusing on the complex interrelationships among Earth's systems, the concept of sustainability ties together many League positions and reiterates League program goals. It is an overarching concept. The integration of positions to articulate interactions can make them more effective.

- Sustainable development depends on the integration of social, economic, and environmental goals.

- Sustainable governing policies and practices recognize the interdependence of environmental, social, and economic impacts, and provide for long-term protection of natural and social resources. These interrelationships are reflected in the use of “full-cost accounting” that assesses all direct and indirect economic, environmental, and social costs of production and programs.
- Sustainable governance decisions are based on comprehensive information and evaluation, and encourage public and individual responsibility for maintaining a healthy ecology.
- Democratic sustainable governance relies upon public participation in decision making.

### **Integrating League Positions**

For purposes of clarity and depth, League studies have traditionally focused on specific and deliberately narrowed topics. The resulting positions often omit consideration of interrelationships or, at least, leave them unstated. Action decisions, therefore, involve examination of a number of relevant positions and considerations of overlapping issues and impacts. By using integration, resolutions may be seen in a different light. It may be necessary to set priorities and make choices among competing near-term objectives, but long-term goals should not be in competition. (We often see this in Colorado when deciding on positions concerning Ballot Issues.)

The goals and aims embodied in LWV positions are not ends in themselves. Rather, League studies have been guided by the overarching principles of the national organization which are strongly consistent with those of sustainability: fairness, justice, equity and flexibility

### **Measuring Sustainability: *Indicators***

Progress toward achieving sustainability can be measured by monitoring changes in selected characteristics, or indicators. These should be quantifiable, readily available, and easily understood, such as levels of air pollution, crowding of schools, rates of infant mortality, etc. Indicators are necessarily oriented to the needs of the community in question. Broad-based community involvement in identifying the important indicators is a crucial step in achieving social equity. It is a way of recognizing that different issues may be important to different segments of the population.

### **Local Uses of the Policy**

Local Leagues may look for sustainable development in their cities and counties. They can monitor general plans and ordinances for the integration of the “three e’s”: environment, economy, and equity. Health care accessibility can be evaluated. Leagues can advocate broad-based participation (all players at the table) in determining indicators. Leagues can promote equitable community planning (social sustainability).

**Principles Statement**

*Sustainability is a way of life which seeks a balance in meeting current environment, economic and human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet the same goal.*

*The concept of Sustainability is implicit in the Principles of the League of Women Voters. League positions are in compliance with the fundamental principle of sustainability, recognizing the interdependency among issues of public policy, and the impact of current decisions on the global welfare of future generations.*

**Appendix I:** History of the Concept of Sustainability

**Appendix II:** Elements of Sustainability

**Appendix III:** State and National League Positions Consistent with Sustainability

**Appendix IV:** Examples of Sustainability (Agriculture, Businesses, Environment, Government, Social Policy, etc)

**Appendix V:** LWV California website

**Appendix VI:** Graphs of Sustainability, relevant Websites

**Appendix VII:** Local League Survey results

**Appendix VIII:** Discussion Questions