



2021 Issue Paper: Elections

Position Statements

As stated in the League of Women Voters [Impact on Issues 2018-2020](#), the League believes voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed.

The LWV of Washington, as stated in its [Program in Action 2019-2021](#):

- Supports state election laws allowing for more options for alternative election systems in governmental jurisdictions at both the state and local levels. (EM-1)
- Believes that consideration should be given, when evaluating election systems, to how well they promote “representative-ness,” citizen participation and accountability, as well as keeping the cost of elections within range by holding them in regularly scheduled General or Special Elections. (EM-2)
- Changes [in the initiative process, IR-4] that would:
 - Provide information to citizens, including, but not limited to, sponsors and major financial supporters of the measure through the Voters’ Pamphlet and other outlets.
 - Require clear and accurate ballot titles, summaries, and a clear statement of intent.
 - Require initiative sponsors to suggest ways in which revenue losses or budget increases might be covered, either through program cuts or increases in revenue sources.
 - Provide an advisory opinion as to the constitutionality of an initiative after it has been certified to the ballot.

Summary of Issues for the 2021 Legislative Session

Voting rights for those previously convicted of a felony

Currently, voting rights are restored to those with a felony conviction only after they who are no longer under community custody (“parole”). Further, that right can be revoked if they fall behind on paying their legal financial obligations (LFOs). Thousands of Washingtonians who have returned home after completing their sentences are denied their fundamental rights to vote. This harms reintegration into community, makes democracy less truly representative, and disproportionately affects BIPOC communities/low-income communities.

There is no justification for punishing people after they have been released from prison. Rather, Washington should encourage returning citizens to invest in their communities through voting. This investment pays dividends in public safety, reduced recidivism, and increased civic involvement. We support having these rights restored upon release from prison and eliminating

the connection to LFOs because it disproportionately disenfranchises those with low incomes, which we believe is antithetical to our democracy.

Citizens' Initiative Reviews

Ballot measures in Washington drive some of the state's largest policy and fiscal decisions, yet voters often find measures too complicated or confusing to understand. Accurate and unbiased information is not only difficult to come by, but it is often drowned out by well-funded campaigns advocating for or against an initiative. This can result in passage of initiatives with huge budget impacts, requiring the legislature to drastically change the budget or overturn the initiative. Establishing a Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) will put accurate, clear, and trustworthy information into the hands of Washington voters, providing them with an objective and factual evaluation using a deliberative process based on solid evidence.

How it works

A panel of Washington citizens is randomly selected and demographically balanced to match the state's electorate along seven key criteria (gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location, party affiliation, educational attainment, and past voter participation). The panel takes several days to evaluate a statewide ballot measure, hearing directly from policy experts as well as advocates for and against the measure. Panelists collectively draft a Citizens' Statement highlighting the measure's most important findings as well as the strongest reasons to support or oppose it. Each Citizens' Statement is published prominently in the voters' pamphlet.

CIR results

Eighteen CIRs have been held in five U.S. states to date, including seven CIRs under Oregon's official statewide program, authorized by statute in 2011. The reviews have proven extremely useful to voters. Research has shown that:

- Voters who read a CIR Statement find it to be the most useful part of the voters' pamphlet.
- CIR Statements are consistently viewed as accurate, comprehensive, and readable to a general audience.
- Voters who knew that a CIR had happened—but had neither participated nor used the Citizens' Statement to vote—still felt a stronger belief that as a citizen they could influence government.
- Voters were more likely to vote on an initiative after having read the CIR.
- Voters had more objectively accurate information about the initiative's impact after reading the CIR.
- Voters who read a CIR voted differently than those who did not.
- Voters *changed their mind* after reading a CIR—a significant break from the traditional prior bias plaguing most political decisions.
- This effect transcended voters' partisan identities and prior attitudes.

Eliminating advisory votes

In 2008, voters passed Initiative 960, which included a section requiring that whenever the legislature raised taxes, the ballot for the next general election would include a question, called an advisory vote, for voters to express their opinion whether to repeal or maintain the tax increase. The ballot does not indicate that the outcome of this vote is in no way binding on the legislature. Because the vote has no impact, there is virtually no information about them available to voters.

The law does require that for each tax increase the voters' pamphlet include a short description of the tax increase, 10-year cost projection, and the record of the vote on the bill that contained the tax increase. The voter's pamphlet does not include any reference to the reason for the increase or information about how the money is being used.

These questions add significantly to the cost of the election; in some cases, this cost is more than the amount of the tax increase itself. In addition to printing, postage, and tallying costs, these advisory votes have a major impact on the cost of the statewide voters' pamphlet. In odd-numbered years where there are often no state races or ballot questions, the pamphlet providing information about the advisory votes only must still be sent to every household in the state. And because the law requires that these opinions, which are in reality "push polls," be at the top of the ballot, they create voter confusion and discouragement, and often leave voters feeling so overwhelmed that they do not vote the entire ballot.

Ranked choice voting

Washington currently uses a single-member, winner-take-all election system. This system has led to several problems, including lack of representation for minority groups, winners without majority support, and elections won by less popular candidates because of vote splitting. Other voting options include proportional representation (PR) and ranked choice voting (RCV). These alternatives reduce the power of gerrymandering, wasted votes, and negative campaigning. They eliminate spoilers and strategic voting, allow for more robust participation by third parties, and result in more diverse representation.

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