

DEMOCRACY MATTERS: LWVSC CIVICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Hands-On CIVICS LEARNING ACTIVITIES

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS SOLANO COUNTY

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Youth Outreach

LWVSC Civics Class Program
Curriculum Overview

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS SOLANO to provide participating students civic learning opportunities by engaging them in hands-on, project-based learning activities to promote citizen participation in local government.

Training of three hallmark league activities and programs were offered to students:

- 1) Observer Corps Training
- 2) How to Plan and Conduct a Forum
- 3) How to register voters. (*Scheduled with John Gardner, Solano Voter Asst. Registrar of Voters*)

These activities are designed to provide students a better understanding of how government systems work; to get students involved in community issues; and to provide tools and resources on how to participate in the process of debating, electing, governing and consensus building.

LWVSC's Youth Outreach goals are to: 1) use League programs, activities and resources to prepare students to enter adulthood and society as responsible citizens respectful of humanity and individual dignity with a community mindset; and 2) to encourage ongoing civic engagement/required to forever protect our fragile democracy.

Respectfully submitted by
Alice Fried

DEMOCRACY MATTERS: 2023 Civics Learning Opportunities

DEMOCRACY MATTERS-LWVSC Civics Education Program is a series of project-based, hands-on civics learning activities on how to engage and participate in the local government process. It is designed to provide students a better understanding of how our democracy works and the role citizens must play to make it work for all. And is, therefore, incumbent upon the development of communication and critical thinking skills that is an outcome of this education program.

These citizenship-building activities were developed from League tools, resources, and procedures on how to participate in the process of debating, consensus building, electing, and governing indicative of the League's commitment to protecting and sustaining democracy. This program is intended to help Solano students enter society informed and prepared to engage in the democratic government process.

The hands-on, project-based learning activities offered to students focus on local governance and include hallmark league tools and rules of engagement:

1. Observer Corps Training to encourage students to participate in local government by attending governing boards and agency meetings. The training includes information on the constitutional right-to-know laws as well as instruction on how to participate and engage elected officials with civility.
Hands-on-Activity—a mock city council meeting.
2. Voter Registration Training to encourage students to not only register to vote, but how to instigate peer-on-peer voter registration. This hands-on training is conducted by Assistant Registrar of Voters, John Gardner and his team and include training on how to use voter registration equipment and technology, as well as how to man a poll on election day.
Hands-on-Activities—Working at a poll on election days (Adopt a Poll) and registering voters at school activities.
3. Forum Training to encourage students to not only attend candidate and issue/policy information forums, but how to organize and present their own forums using the rules of engagement and civility techniques used by the historic League of Women Voters.
Hands-on-Activity—Student-led forum.

Democracy simply stated is a government of, by and for the people. DEMOCRACY MATTERS provides tangible, education tools that not only encourages, but informs citizens how to perform civic-participation responsibilities. Democracy, after all, is not something we have but something we do.



OBSERVER CORPS TRAINING

Date: _____

Observing Your Government in Action

Protecting Your Right to Know





OBSERVER CORPS PROGRAM TRAINING

(Suggested) AGENDA

PAL Introductions

1. WELCOME
2. Program Overview
3. DIRECT INSTRUCTION
 - a. The laws that give us the “right to know” and 10 exemptions from disclosing matters in open meeting
 - b. League’s Observing Rules of Engagement
 - c. Selecting government office/agency/council to observe, and
 - d. What observers monitor
 - e. What to do with collected information
 - f. Observer Corps Proposed Structure
 - g. Summary—Review—Observer Checklist
 - h. Role Play—Mock Vacaville City Council Meeting
Led by Vacaville Vice Mayor, Jeanette Wylie,
District 6 Vacaville City Council Representative
4. CLOSING REMARKS



OBSERVER CORP TRAINING

LWVSC DEMOCRACY MATTERS CIVICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

(Why and how to participate in local government and board meetings)

RAISES AWARENESS AND FACILITATES GOOD CITIZENSHIP/

INFORMED ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL POLITICAL PROCESS

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Syllabus

League of Women Voters Solano County (LWVSC) Observer Corps Program (OCP) Training

What is an Observer Corps?

The League of Women Voters has been a champion of government transparency and accountability since its founding in 1920, thereby the creation of the League **Observer Corps Program (OCP)**. The OCP is a structured way for individuals to exercise their *right to know* as stipulated in the nation's access laws—the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and its follow-up laws, the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972; and the Sunshine Act of 1976; the California Brown Act of 1953; and the California Records Act of 1968.

“Sunshine” or openness in government, is a League priority. In its grassroots organizations across the country, members are working to protect the right of citizens to know—not only by viewing government documents, pursuant to federal government as defined in the FOIA, but also by attending local government meetings such as City/Town Council meetings, School Board meetings, City Planning/Zoning meetings, Parks and Recreation Department meetings, Health Department meetings, and more, afforded to states and local governments in the Sunshine Act.

The LWVSC Observer Corps Program will focus on the access to government meetings granted in the Ralph M. Brown Act that solely applies to California. The California Brown Act gives Californians the “sunshine” or access that enables firsthand knowledge about what local government is doing for community development and protection, and to monitor whether those meetings are conducted in an open and transparent way.

Objective: LWVSC to provide and protect Solano County residents’ public access to information—their *right to know*—to provide Solano citizens a way to engage actively in the government process to make their lives and their communities stronger, integral to the health of our democracy; and to increase participation in the League.



Goals:

- a) Create a civically engaged and empowered citizenry;
- b) Inform individuals about community issues and the government laws and policy solutions proposed to solve them;
- c) Promote open, transparent and accountable government; and
- d) Connect elected/appointed officials with constituents.

Focus:

- a) To provide Observer Corps members general information on how to promote transparency and accountability efforts to increase citizen engagement in the government process as well as participation in League activities.
- b) To provide Observer Corps members specific protocols and conduct codes to uphold when observing a government meeting that exemplifies the civility and integrity that is fundamental to the League's mission, success, and legacy.

Program Description:

This training program emphasizes the need, as well as ways and means for citizens to effectively observe local government and administrative meetings including how to communicate/share findings facilitate and sustain a healthy democracy for all.

Members will gain insights into:

- 1) The Federal Sunshine Act of 1976 which gives all 50 states and the District of Columbia public access to government meetings; the CA State Brown Act of 1953, which requires California government agencies, boards and councils to conduct business in open and public meetings; and the California Records Act of 1968 that requires government agencies, boards and councils records are available for public inspection.
- 2) How to communicate and perform non-partisan role to members observing office/agency/council meetings so as **not** to be perceived in a negative light.
- 3) The offices/agencies/councils to monitor and those that are exempt.



4) What observers will be monitoring:

Process and protocol: Who is there? How is the meeting being conducted? Where and what time is the meeting being held?

Content: Agenda—what issue(s) are being discussed? Was an action proposed or approved? Does action relate to any of the League's priorities or positions? What or whether follow-up action is required?

5) OCP infrastructure to include: Directing activities of observers; reviewing agendas prior to monitoring; provide observers with necessary tools, i.e. reporting forms, information on relevant review organization's public policy positions; recommending agencies/offices to be monitored to leadership; reviewing observer reports to recommend (or not) possible follow-up; recruiting and training new observers.

6) Resources and Materials to be effective observers. [Sandy add URLs]

Reporting Form (*Eden Format*)

List of Government Office/Agency Websites to access: official names, positions, contact info, etc., agendas and minutes; meeting dates, time and place; information and data on office/agency positions and policies.

List of League Positions and Priorities

The Ralph M. Brown Act of 1953

7) What to do with information collected:

- a. Share Observer Reports with others via OCP events and reports. League members share collected information with League leadership.
- b. Determine When/How to interact and discuss reports with members of office/agency being observed;
- c. Write Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor when warranted;
- d. Give Media Interviews when feasible.

8) Role Play Practice Exercise—Act of attending and observing a **mock** office/agency/council official meeting.

9) Summary—Review—Observer Checklist

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OBSERVER CORPS RESOURCES



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SUNSHINE LAWS OVERVIEW

NATIONAL SUNSHINE LAWS

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Government in the Sunshine Act assert the public's right to know in relation to activities of the federal government

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 1967,

FOIA has provided the public the right to request access to records from any federal agency. It is often described as the law that keeps citizens in the know about their government. Federal agencies are required to disclose any information requested under the FOIA unless it falls under one of nine exemptions which protect interests such as personal privacy, national security, and law enforcement.

Public Law 94-409 94th Congress An Act September 13, 1976

To provide that meetings of Government agencies shall be open to the public, and for other purpose. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That this Act may be cited as the "Government in the Sunshine Act".

Sec 2 It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that the public is entitled to the fullest practicable information regarding the decision making processes of the Federal Government. It is the purpose of this Act to provide the public with such information while protecting the rights of individuals and the ability of the Government to carry out its responsibilities.

Sec 3 Open meetings

Members shall not jointly conduct or dispose of agency business other than in accordance with this section. Except as provided in sub-section (c), every portion of every meeting of an agency shall be open to public observation.



CALIFORNIA SUNSHINE LAWS

The Brown Act (The following is drawn largely from information provided by the Alameda County DA, 11-17-2016, it may vary in other counties/regions)

"The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. " (54950)

The Open Meeting Rule

Meetings are OPEN to the public; exceptions to the rule are limited: all meetings of the legislative body of a local agency shall be open and public, to all persons.

Who is Subject to the Brown Act?

- Any board, commission, committee or other body created by a charter, ordinance, resolution or other formal action of the Board of Supervisors (*or other governing body, e.g. State of California*)
- *Exception: ad hoc committees (other than standing committees) made up of less than a quorum of the body*

What is a "Meeting?"

A meeting occurs whenever a majority of the members of the Commission or of a committee come together at the same time or place (*and discuss/conduct Commission business*)

Meetings: Locations and Time

- Meetings must be within the region of the committee's base
- Meetings must occur at a time and location set by ordinance, resolution or bylaws

Notice & Agenda Requirements

- Regular meeting agendas must be posted 72 hours in advance of the meeting
- Special meeting agendas require only 24 hours advance notice
- Agendas must describe each item to be considered in enough detail that a person of ordinary intelligence could determine whether the item is of interest
- A body subject to the Brown Act may not discuss or act on items not on an agenda or that are beyond the reasonable scope of the agenda description



ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

- To have meetings open and public with limited exceptions
- To have access to all agendas of public meetings and documents distributed to the Legislative Body members
- To record the meetings and to inspect any recordings of the meetings made by the agency.
- To attend without any condition precedent (i.e., need to register or provide any information).

- The public has the right to address the Commission at any regular or special meeting on any item on the agenda, before conclusion of the discussion or the Commission takes action

Limits on Public Comment • Typically “Up to” three minutes (or other limit set by body) on an item • Reasonable limit on total public comment time on an item • No right to a response from policy body or its members

Closed Sessions

The Brown Act specifically authorizes the Commission to meet in “closed session”. Closed sessions are limited to a few specified circumstances and fact specific:

- Only Commission members and necessary support staff can be present in closed session

Disclosure of closed session discussion or other violation of the Act can result in Criminal Penalties

Exemptions to the Brown Act

(In general, these exemptions apply as long as a majority of the members do not discuss among themselves business of a specific nature that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the legislative body.)

1. “Individual Contacts”

Individual contacts or conversations between a member of a legislative body and any other person are permitted, as long as the communications do not result in a serial meeting.

2. Conferences and Seminars

Attendance of a majority of the members of a legislative body at a conference or similar gathering is not a meeting subject to the Brown Act if the gathering

- Is open to the public
- Involves discussion of issues related to the legislative body
- A majority of the members do not discuss among themselves specific business within the jurisdiction of the agency



3. Open Community Meetings

The attendance of a majority of members at an open and publicized meeting organized to address a topic of local community concern by a person or organization other than the local agency...

4. Meetings of Other Legislative Bodies

The attendance of a majority of the members at an open and noticed meeting of another legislative body, does not become a meeting of the first legislative body.

5. Social or Ceremonial Gatherings

The attendance of a majority of the members at a purely social or ceremonial occasion is not a meeting governed by the Brown Act.

6. Meetings of Standing Committees

The attendance of a majority of the members at an open and noticed meeting of a standing committee of that body is not a meeting of the legislative body, provided that the members of the legislative body who are not members of the standing committee attend only as observers.

The California Public Records Act

Requests for public records of public agencies must be made directly to the agency in question. For example, an individual requesting public records from the California Attorney General should submit that request to the attorney general's office. [1]

Purpose and use

California law does not require a statement of purpose when requesting records. However, the law does state that law enforcement may only disclose the "current address of every individual arrested by the agency and the current address of the victim of a crime, if the requester declares under penalty of perjury that the request is made for a scholarly, journalistic, political, or governmental purpose, or that the request is made for investigation purposes by a licensed private investigator."

Every person has a right to make a public records request:

California law allows a fee to be charged to cover the cost of responding to a public records request, as well as any fees authorized by statute.

The California Public Records Act stipulates that an agency must "make the records promptly available."

Agencies have 10 days to determine if requested records are disclosable, except for unusual circumstances which may extend the response time up to 14 days.



SOLANO COUNTY CITY COUNCIL WEBSITES

Benicia <https://www.ci.benicia.ca.us/>

First and third Tuesdays, 6:00 pm

Dixon https://dixon-ca.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=6

First and third Tuesdays, 7:00 pm

Fairfield

<https://fairfield.novusagenda.com/agendapublic/MeetingView.aspx?MeetingID=174&MinutesMeetingID=-1&doctype=Agenda>

<https://www.fairfield.ca.gov/government/city-council/city-councilmembers>

First and third Tuesdays, 6:00 pm

Rio Vista <https://www.riovistacity.com/>

First and third Tuesdays, 6:00 pm

Suisun City <https://www.suisun.com/government/city-council/>

Twice a month, first and third Tuesdays, 6:30 pm

Vacaville <https://www.ci.vacaville.ca.us/city-government/agendas-and-minutes>

2nd and 4th Tuesdays, 6:00 pm

Vallejo <https://www.cityofvallejo.net/cms/One.aspx?portalId=13506&pageId=6501180>

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm



SOLANO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Meets the first, second and fourth Tuesday at 9:00 am. Meetings are recorded.

The following links provide the agendas for the Board of Supervisors, the agendas for the Mental Health Advisory Board and district lookup.

<https://www.solanocounty.com/depts/bos/default.asp>

<https://www.solanocounty.com/depts/mhs/mhab.asp>

https://www.solanocounty.com/depts/rov/district_maps_and_lookup/districtlookup.asp

SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Vacaville Unified School District

<https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/vusdca/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=C4ETBM74DF5C>

Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District

<https://www.fsusd.org/GoverningBoard>

Dixon Unified School District

<https://www.dixonusd.org/>

Benicia Unified School District

<https://beniciaunified.org/>

Vallejo City Unified School District

<https://www.vallejo.k12.ca.us/>

Rio Vista Unified School District

<https://rdusd-ca.schoolloop.com/>



OBSERVER CORPS REPORTING FORM

Agency _____ Date _____

Feature Evaluated	Yes	No
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- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Did the meeting start on time? | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Were all members present? | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Were members attentive? | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Were members prepared? | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Were members courteous to each other and the Public? | | |
| <input type="radio"/> Were Brown Act requirements followed? | | |
| <input type="radio"/> Agenda sent/posted 72 hrs before the meeting? | | |
| <input type="radio"/> Agenda items clearly described what was being discussed. | | |
| <input type="radio"/> Adequate opportunity for public input? | | |
| <input type="radio"/> Was background information available to the Public? | | |

Observer Signature: _____

Report should be submitted to OC Coordinator. Attach agency agenda, if possible.



OBSERVER CHECKLIST

Before

Review agenda of government body or bodies you're interested in observing.

Confirm the meeting date, time and location.

View government body's website, social media and news to brush up on its issues and actions of interest.

During

(Optional) Introduce yourself to government officials and people attending if you are attending as LWVSC member. (Wear identifying badge)

Pay attention!

Take Notes. Look for answers to Observer Report questions.

(Optional) Live-post to social media. (LWV Solano Facebook, Instagram pages)

After

Submit your report to Observer Corps Coordinator. (Make sure you get confirmation of receipt.)

(OC Coordinator) Share report with others in community for feedback and next steps.

Determine if report should be shared with government officials who were observed and/or whether or not further action is required.



LWVSC

Forum Training-A Civics Learning Activity

Syllabus

The purpose of this *civics learning activity* is to give students insights and instructions on how to set up and conduct a forum (a meeting) designed to gather and exchange ideas and views from elected officials or experts on a particular community issue in an open public discussion.

Students will learn how forums initiate connections and build a sense of community that cultivate civic engagement in the creation of good public policies and laws that protect and sustain democracy for all. This LWVSC training activity will focus on the steps required to produce an effective forum using the "Discussion Format" to include League civility framework before, during and after the forum.

Before the Forum,

Select an Event Coordinator who makes sure that the details of the event run smoothly and will be contact person for all participants. Specifically, the event coordinator will coordinate the event planning tasks that:

Determine agency/office/candidate you'd like to invite noting if there are legal constraints;

- Determine the audience. (League forums are generally open to the public.);
- Decide date, time and venue, including whether in person or virtual;

Send invites include: purpose of meeting, request bio and permission to use in publicity as well as permission to video and record event. Establish and request a deadline to reply.

Publicizing Forum: Getting the Word Out

Advertising takes lots of lead time and consideration should be given to how to reach those targeted to attend. Select a publicity point person or committee to:

- List event on school and community calendars
- Tell colleagues (classmates) friends and family
- Post signs/posters online and around campus



- Contact media you think might be interested and remind editors and reporters about the event.

Note: News releases should be sent simultaneously to media and participants.



Organize the Structure of the Forum

Decide on Forum Format, i.e. Basic Format, Discussion Format, or Debate Format

Select Question Committee—creates on-topic questions that focus on issues important to the audience; also screens questions from the floor to exclude redundancies and disrespect. The number of questions asked and how long each panelist has to answer each question will depend on how many panelists there are and how long the event will last. Allow time for opening and closing remarks from the moderator and each panelist.

Communicate with panelist participants as soon as possible noting rules of engagement; securing permission to record and video and use of forum images

Select Volunteers:

Moderator -- has the responsibility for enforcing the time limits, rules and format that have been agreed upon.

Timekeeper -- works out unobtrusive ways of alerting participants to their time limits.

Tech Support -- makes sure that microphones, audio, and video equipment are working; also ensures that microphones are placed so that all participants have access; and that lighting is appropriate for participants as well as to facilitate video recording.

Platform/Venue Set up Committee—arranges room set up for panelist participant and audience seating; and create and position place cards to identify each panelist participant. Must also make sure each participant has access to paper, pencils, and water. Also, make sure information about organization is available.

Hint: Always a good idea to set up a voter-registration table at event that is open to public.

Hosts—create a list and name tags for panelist participants to make sure they are properly greeted and identified upon arrival; also show panelist participants set-up and seating; introduce to organization administrators and/or leaders. Hosts should also staff voter-registration table if necessary.



Conducting the Forum: What Will be Happening

Prepare the Program/Agenda – To let the audience know what to expect and to present biographical information submitted by participants, as well as description of agency and/or topic being discussed.

Suggested Format

- The moderator should introduce the event briefly and thank the audience for coming and any groups that have contributed to the planning of the event and anyone who provided any support, equipment, advertising, or facility support. Then summarize the rules of the event and explain the format to the audience.
- The audience should be asked to refrain from applauding, booing, cheering, whistling or in other ways demonstrating support or nonsupport for a participant. Applause for all participants should be allowed once, at the conclusion of the forum. (This does not apply to a virtual forum.)
- The moderator should state that all those who qualify to be on the panel have been invited.
- If a panel participant cannot attend, the rule regarding nonparticipation should be explained to the audience. For example: a representative may make an opening statement only and may not respond to questions. If a panel participant did not attend or send a representative, mention that they were invited, but were unable to attend. Usually, it is best not to try to explain why the panelist is not in attendance. This can result in bias.
- If it is a virtual forum, panelists must use the name that appeared on the ballot when they were elected as their name in the identifying name box on screen, along with the position they hold. If the forum is live, name plates should be on the podium or table in front of the panelist.

Event Guidelines/Rules

- The panelists should always remain seated during the forum. Stools or chairs should be provided unless it is a virtual forum.
- Panelists should be given equal time for opening statements and closing statements.
- Every question will be presented to each of the panelists, who will have equal time to respond to these questions.
- Panelists should answer questions in a rotating order, so the same person does not always go first.
- The moderator may restate the question if asked.
- The panelists should not be allowed to interrupt one another.
- For some forums, questions for the panel are requested from the audience in attendance at the event. These questions can be written on index cards, collected by event organizers, screened, and read to the panel by the moderator. Or in the event of a virtual forum, these questions can be submitted by email, direct messaging, live streaming audience, etc. If this method is chosen, questions should be reviewed, screened for bias, for appropriateness and to avoid duplication. And only appropriate nonbiased questions should be used.
- At live forums, tables outside the meeting room can be available for literature upon conclusion of the forum. Literature may not be handed out as the audience enters.



- At live forums, no visible campaign items can be permitted in the meeting room.
- For virtual forums no campaign items or signs shall be visible within the view of the audience.
- Panelists may not use charts, signs, or any type of visual props.
- No flash photography should be allowed during the forum.
- No video other than by the sponsoring organization or approved news media may be taken.
- The sponsoring organization reserves the right to publicize the forum, and may, at their option, invite the media or some other entity not associated with any of the panelists to provide televised, radio, or other coverage of the forum. If the event is recorded or transcribed, participants in the forum agree that copyright ownership of the recordings or transcripts resides with the sponsoring organization.
- The panelists must agree that they, their organizations, and their supporters will not use the forum, portions of the forum or any audio clips, video clips or transcripts for political advertising, or other purposes without written permission from the sponsoring organization.

Have a run through a week/day before event to avoid chaos and last minute confusion and to facilitate easier implementation of unexpected changes.

VOTER REGISTRATION TRAINING



This hands-on training is offered through our partnership with the Solano Voter Registrar's Office. Participants are trained on how, when and where to register to vote including how to register others. They are also trained on how to vote using state-approved voting equipment and technology.

The Hands on Activity—Registering voters at school and other voter registration drives. Opportunities to work at a poll on election days are offered with our partner, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority via the county's Adopt-a-Poll program.