



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

Capitol Report 2013

May 24, 2013

Filed by: Ben Wilcox, LWVF Governmental Consultant

2013 Session Wrap Up

The 2013 legislative session is over and this week Governor Rick Scott signed into law the election reform bill that was the League's top priority. Overall, this was a great legislative session for the League of Women Voters of Florida and we want to thank all of you for following the action and speaking out!

Because of your support for our work here 'on the ground' in the halls of the Capitol, the League scored victories in election reform, ethics reform, and finally....the right to speak in public meetings all across Florida. In addition, with your phone calls we were able to help encourage the Governor to veto the alimony bill and to successfully advocate for taking out some of the very worst provisions of a bad water bill that would have vastly reduced protections on the quantity and quality of water. Well done - It was a very successful session for the League of Women Voters of Florida! Still to accomplish – which we will resume after a very brief break for a fresh strategy – the state's acceptance of the Medicaid Expansion dollars so uninsured Floridians can finally have health care.

Election Reform

This week, Governor Rick Scott signed the election reform package ([HB 7013](#)), one of our areas of strongest advocacy. The final bill contains virtually all of the League's priorities including a huge expansion of early voting opportunities, allowing voters who have moved from one county to another to update their voter registration addresses at the polls and the ability to "cure" an absentee ballot that has been disqualified due to problems with the signature.

All of the bad provisions that at one point were in the bill were removed from the final version including one that would have allowed Florida's Secretary of State to wipe out bonuses for elections supervisors who are deemed "out of compliance" with elections standards. The League shared the concern of the Supervisors that the provision would give the Secretary of State, who is appointed by the Governor, too much authority over the Supervisors who are constitutional officers elected by county voters.

Good things the new law does:

- **Significantly increases the hours and days allowed for early voting** and gives the Supervisors of Elections much more flexibility in selecting early voting sites, something the League has long advocated for.
- **Places a 75 word limit** on the first version of ballot summaries for legislatively proposed constitutional amendments. (This limit only applies to the Legislature. If the ballot summary is rejected by the Courts, the Attorney General may propose an alternative summary that is longer than 75 words.)
- **Allows a voter to “fix” an absentee ballot** that is “spoiled” because a signature has changed OR IS MISSING or for other possible reasons - a key League request.
- **Allows voters in most Florida counties who have moved to make address changes** at the polls on election day. This was something the League led the push for.

Good things the law does NOT do, that the League had been advocating for:

- **Mandate early voting on the last Sunday** before an election. The bill does give Supervisors the flexibility to have early voting on that Sunday, but it doesn't mandate it. It will be up to local Leagues to ensure Supervisors provide this.
- **Provide for an expedited voting process** for the elderly and disabled.

Bad thing the law does:

- **Requires a written request** for absentee ballots to be sent to an address other than the voter's home address. This is unnecessary and will make it more difficult for someone who is travelling to get an absentee ballot. An amendment added to the bill exempts members of the military from this requirement.

Campaign Finance Reform

The campaign finance reform bill ([HB 569](#)) was a priority for House Speaker Will Weatherford and it was the subject of behind the scenes negotiations in the last week of session that eventually resulted in the bill's passage. While the bill had been improved from the original proposal to raise campaign contribution limits from \$500 to \$10,000, it still raises contribution limits higher than the League would like and the League asked Governor Scott to veto the bill. On Wednesday of the last week of session Governor Scott signed the bill into law.

League President Deirdre Macnab issued the following statement on the passage of the campaign finance bill:

“By increasing campaign contribution limits, HB 569 opens the door for even more political spending and undue influence of our democratic process. Gains in transparency and reporting were minimal, as new channels were created for ever-larger donations. Main Street Florida lost on this bill, while incumbents and deep-pocketed donors were the big winners.”

While the new law does some good things, the League believes the bad outweigh the good.

Good things the law does:

- **Enhances reporting and disclosure requirements.**
- **Eliminates shadowy political committees** known as CCE’s.
- **Places a limit on “turnbacks”** from surplus campaign funds to political parties. Currently there is no limit.

Bad things the law does:

- **Increases campaign contribution limits** above the current \$500 limit. The law increases the contribution limit for statewide races to \$3,000 per election cycle and for legislative and local races the limit goes up to \$1,000. The League believes raising the limits on campaign contributions not only reduces the likelihood of contributions from ordinary Florida voters, but it also has been shown to reduce voter turnout, something that Florida can ill afford.
- **Gives Political Committee’s the ability to accept unlimited contributions** and make unlimited independent expenditures.
- **Allows a candidate to carry-over \$20,000 from one election cycle to another** for a re-election campaign. This provision unfairly benefits incumbents.

Ethics Reform

An ethics reform bill ([SB 2](#)) was the other part of the deal that was struck by legislative leaders leading up to its passage in the last week of session. The League supports the bill which was a priority for Senate President Don Gaetz. The bill does some very good things, but also contains a couple of provisions that fall short of what the League had hoped for. The League worked hard to craft the best ethics reform bill possible. When Governor Scott signed the bill into law in the last week of session it was another victory for the League!

Good things the new law does:

- **Bars elected officials from taking advantage of their positions** to get taxpayer funded jobs.

- **Increases the ability of the Ethics Commission to collect fines** that are owed.
- **Blocks lawmakers from lobbying state agencies** for two years after they leave office.
- **Requires financial disclosure forms to be put online** and requires the Ethics Commission to develop an electronic filing system for financial disclosure.
- **Allows referrals of ethics complaints** from the Governor's office, FDLE, state attorneys and the U.S. Attorney.
- **Requires four hours a year of ethics training** for constitutional officers.

Bad thing the law does:

- **Includes a "get out of jail free card"** that gives public officials 30 days to go back and fix an error on a financial disclosure form after an ethics complaint has been filed and not face a penalty.

Right to Speak

Another top priority for the League this year was a bill that will give citizens a "reasonable" right to speak at meetings of local government and state executive branch bodies. The Senate bill ([SB 50](#)) was filed by Senator Joe Negron in response to two court rulings that found that while Florida's "sunshine law" requires officials meet in public, it does not give the public the right to be heard on issues being discussed at those meetings.

The League has supported this bill every year since it has come up. The passage of this bill represents another victory for the League!

Health Care Reform

The League is disappointed that the legislature adjourned without taking action on the issue of Medicaid expansion. Governor Scott has called for lawmakers to expand Medicaid to 900,000 or more poorer Floridians as part of the federal health care overhaul. The League supported the expansion of Medicaid and asked its members repeatedly to **call** or e-mail Senate President Gaetz and Speaker Weatherford and let them know that Florida citizens want them to implement the federal Affordable Health Care Act.

Speaker Weatherford and the House of Representatives refused to accept the federal funding for Medicaid expansion even if it meant forfeiting billions of dollars to other states. The plan developed by the House would have bypassed more than \$50 billion in federal aid and set up a clash between Governor Rick Scott and the Senate. The House plan would have provided coverage to up to 130,000 disabled adults and adults with children, far less than the 1 million Floridians who would receive coverage if Florida received the federal money.

The Senate plan by Senator Joe Negron would have allowed Florida to accept the federal money, but not have government run the program. Instead it would have been managed by the private nonprofit Florida Healthy Kids Corp. The League supported this option.

It's possible the legislature will return later in the year for a special session on the Medicaid Expansion. The League strongly supports a special session on this issue.

Environmental Permitting

The League **was** opposed to a bad environmental bill that would do damage to millions of acres of wetlands across the state. House bill [999](#) was passed in the last week of session, but the two bad provisions were removed. The first bad provision dealt with an **exemption for 298 Special Districts from local wetland permitting rules** and the second was the **pre-emption of and moratorium on local fertilizer ordinances**. In the end, the bill was passed, but the removal of the two bad provisions was another victory for the League!!!

The League would like to thank its members who helped to lobby for and against issues that the League believes are critical. The League had a tremendously successful legislative session in large part due to your help. Thank you for your support of our lobbying efforts!!!

League Priority Issues

The League set three program areas for the 2013 legislative session, including Government, Education and Social Policy.

Government: Promote an open government that is responsive to the people of the state.

- Finance and Taxation: Support a state fiscal structure that is equitable in its distribution of tax responsibility and responsive to public needs.
- Reapportionment: Actively promote and support the reapportionment process.
- Ethics: Promote the strengthening of the Florida Commission on Ethics, including the areas of independence, subpoena power and the ability to levy fines and initiate an investigation.
- Election Law: Support greater flexibility in the selection of early voting sites.

Education: Support a free public school system for Florida with high standards for student achievement and with equality of educational opportunity for all that is financed adequately by the state through an equitable funding formula.

- Promote adequate funding of public education with no use of public funding for the expansion of funding of private education through a voucher program.
- Promote the extension of public school testing of student achievement to private schools, charter schools and any institutions that receive state funding.

Social Policy: Secure equal rights and equal opportunity for all. Promote social and economic justice and the health and safety of all Americans.

- **Health Care:** Support implementation of the federal Health Care Reform Law in Florida, emphasizing access for all and control of costs.

- **Immigration:** Promote reunification of immediate families; meet the economic, business and employment needs of the United States; be responsive to those facing political persecution or humanitarian crises; and provide for student visas. Ensure fair treatment under the law for all persons. In transition to a reformed system, support provisions for unauthorized immigrants already in the country to earn legal status.

Get Involved!

Ben Wilcox is the League's professional lobbyist for the 2013 legislative session. We are still looking for folks to participate in the Lobbying Corps, so please contact Marilyn Wills (marilynnwills@msn.com) or Rebecca Sager (rsager@music.org) if you are interested.

Updates on League legislative issues will be provided on a regular basis through Capitol Report, which is published every week during the session. Important information may also be accessed at www.leg.state.fl.us.

Watch for your Capitol Report each Friday of the session for news on priority issues and what you can do to help. For updates on or copies of proposed legislation, call legislative information at 1-800-342-1827 or visit the Florida Online Sunshine homepage at www.leg.state.fl.us. For more information about the League's advocacy, check out www.TheFloridaVoter.org