



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

## Capitol Report 2013

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### Overview

Since November of 2012, committee meetings have been taking place in Tallahassee in preparation for the 2013 Legislative Session. The League has a number of priority issues that are expected to receive attention during this year's regular session which begins on March 5th. Work on some of these issues has already begun during pre-session committee weeks. There were two weeks of committee meetings in January and there are three weeks of committee meetings scheduled in February.

As a result of the 2012 election, the 2013 legislature looks very different from the way it did last year. There are 44 new House members and 15 new senators this year. Not all are new to the legislative process; former senator Tom Lee is returning to the Senate and longtime legislator Mike Fasano moves back to the House from the Senate. The Democratic Party made gains in both chambers picking up two seats in the Senate for a total of 14 Democrats and 26 Republicans. The Democrats picked up five seats in the House for a total of 44 Democrats and 76 Republicans. Republicans no longer have enough votes in both chambers to pass constitutional amendments by a 3/5ths vote or to override a veto by the Governor with a 2/3rds vote.

This will be the first legislative session for new Senate President Don Gaetz and House Speaker Will Weatherford. Both leaders have pledged to work in a more bipartisan fashion than their predecessors. Senator Gaetz has identified ethics reform and election reform as two top priorities along with reform of the health care system. When the Senate met in November for its organizational session, President Gaetz pushed through a rule change mandating that each senator undergo at least an hour of ethics training and barring senators from voting on bills in which they have a conflict of interest. House Speaker Weatherford's priorities include campaign finance and election reform along with reform of the higher education system. Leading the Democrats this year will be Senator Chris Smith and Representative Perry Thurston.

In January, Governor Rick Scott unveiled his proposed budget going into his third legislative session. For the first time in recent years the budget is growing and Scott's proposal calls for a \$74 billion budget, the largest in the state's history. Included in the plan is a \$2,500 pay raise for Florida's public school teachers at a cost of \$480 million. Teachers and others were skeptical of the Governor's proposal after Scott cut \$1 billion from the state's education budget in his first year in office. Some have called the move a public

relations stunt designed to improve the Governor's poll numbers as he nears a re-election campaign.

With two weeks remaining before session begins, legislators appear ready to address three of the League's priority issues; election reform, campaign finance reform and ethics reform. Following another flawed Florida election in 2012 where voters experienced long lines at the polls and waited hours to vote, the Governor and legislative leaders now say they see the need for improvement.

In January, Governor Scott asked Secretary of State Ken Detzner to tour the state and meet with the Supervisor's of Election in 5 "underperforming" counties to determine what caused the long lines at the polls. Secretary Detzner issued a report on his findings along with recommendations for reform. You can read the report [here](#). Essentially the Secretary recommends extending early voting days, more flexibility in choosing early voting sites and reducing the length of the ballot by putting a word limit on the ballot summaries of constitutional amendments proposed by the legislature.

After hearing the Secretary of State's recommendations, committees in both the House and Senate began working on separate election reform bills. The House Ethics and Elections subcommittee chaired by Representative Jim Boyd passed its bill at its last meeting. The bill expands the number of allowed early voting days and places some limits on legislatively-sponsored constitutional amendments, but the League believes it does not go far enough and will work to improve the bill as it moves through the legislative process. The Senate Ethics and Elections committee chaired by Senator Jack Latvala has yet to release its election reform bill.

The House is also moving quickly on another priority for Speaker Weatherford; campaign finance reform. Under the bill (HB 569) already passed by the Ethics and Elections subcommittee, the House would raise the current \$500 limit on direct contributions to candidates to \$10,000, require more frequent reporting of contributions and expenditures and eliminate the shadowy political committees called CCE's. While the League likes elements of the House bill, it strongly opposes the increase in the contribution limit because it would allow wealthy special interests to have more influence through large campaign contributions. The bill will be heard next in the House Appropriations committee.

In the Senate, President Gaetz is taking the lead to make ethics reform a top priority. The ethics bill (SB 2) is moving quickly having already been passed by the Ethics and Elections and Community Affairs committees. Under the bill, the state's Commission on Ethics would be given more authority to pursue investigations and be required to modernize its financial disclosure system – putting net worth statements online in a searchable database. It also places new restrictions on legislators who become lobbyists after leaving office as well as on state and local officials who take new jobs after being elected with universities or other public employers.

The League is also tracking several other issues that are priorities this year. One of those issues is the so-called "parent trigger bill (SB 862). This bill was defeated last year on a tie

vote in the Senate. It would allow parents to petition their school board to turn a public school into a charter school if that school drew a “failing” grade for two years in a row. Supporters say the bill empowers parents, but the League and other opponents say it’s meant to increase the number of charter schools in the state and allow deep-pocketed companies to fund campaigns allowing them to take over schools.

In addition to those issues, the League is also monitoring the legislature’s work on the issues of environmental protection, health care and immigration. At this early stage of the 2013 legislative session, the leaders in the House and Senate have expressed their willingness to work with the League on a variety of issues. So far it’s been a refreshing change from the battles of years past.

I would like to take this opportunity to personally appeal to League members to join us in Tallahassee for the 2013 legislative Summit. I have said before how valuable it is to our lobbying efforts to have you here in Tallahassee speaking to your local Senators and Representatives. Your presence is a powerful reminder that they were elected by voters like yourselves and that you expect them to listen when you take the trouble to come here and talk with them about our priorities and concerns. In addition to the serious work there are lots of fun events that are planned and we hope to see you in Tallahassee beginning Wednesday, April 10<sup>th</sup>. Please visit the League’s website at <http://www.thefloridavoter.org/events/legislative-summit> for more details.

As you can see, it’s sure to be an interesting and exciting legislative session and one in which the League of Women Voters of Florida will be very active. We will be asking for your help to lobby for and against issues that the League believes are critical. Thank you in advance for your support of our lobbying efforts.

### **League Priority Issues**

The League has 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: Support the rights of legal immigrants to prevention or reduction of poverty, a minimum basic level of health care at affordable costs, the well-being of children and families and access to free public schools with federal and state financial assistance to communities disproportionately impacted by immigration.

### **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](http://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](http://www.leg.state.fl.us). For more information about the League's advocacy, check out [www.TheFloridaVoter.org](http://www.TheFloridaVoter.org)