



Thursday, March 21, 2024

Dear Members of the House & Governmental Affairs Committee:

The League of Women Voters of Louisiana writes to **OPPOSE HB506**, scheduled on the agenda of the House & Governmental Affairs Committee of the Louisiana Legislature for its meeting on Thursday, March 21, 2024.

As we understand the bill, it sets up a mandatory registration regime for individuals and groups wishing to do voter registration drives who are not currently election officials or a voter registration agency. Individuals and groups aspiring to conduct voter registration drives are to register with the Secretary of State, under some process to be established, acknowledging both the requirement of and possible criminal offenses related to voter registration and voter registration drives. The penalties for such offenses consist of hefty fines and possible imprisonment. The bill specifies additional penalties for failure to submit voter registration forms to the registrar in a timely manner.

The bill impedes voter registration and raises many questions concerning: (1) who would be allowed to register to conduct voter registration drives and (2) how a policy to register individuals and organizations to register voters would be implemented.

On the “who” side, the League of Women Voters of Louisiana is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, civil society organization with a core mission of voter registration and voter education, along with education of citizens for public participation and educational advocacy with elected officials and government bodies on issues of democracy and good governance on which the League has conducted studies and taken positions. Our voter registration and voter education activities, which the League has conducted nationally for more than a century in Louisiana since the 1940s are conducted under the highest and strictest nonpartisan standards under the auspices of our 501(c)(3) organization, the League of Women Voters of Louisiana Education Fund. We tell people when, where, how, and why of voting—but we never tell them for whom they should vote.

Even with our lengthy and distinguished history of nonpartisan voter registration in Louisiana, one of our chapters, the LWV of Lafayette chapter, has been denied permission to conduct registration drives in Lafayette Parish high schools, even though we had done so successfully for a decade prior to the denial. The cause of the denial was a law passed by this legislature, Act 624 of 2022, that purported to mandate the opportunity for students to register to vote, but which, in Lafayette Parish, became the occasion for the Lafayette Parish School Board to deny third-party groups permission to conduct voter registration drives.

The proximate cause of the denial of voter registration privileges to LWV of Lafayette was, a “guidance” published by the Secretary of State in January 2023 concerning what groups or organizations could do voter registration in high schools. In addition to backtracking on the

mandate by saying that schools “may” conduct instead of “shall” conduct voter registration and including a problematic parental notification and consent provision, the “guidance” gave schools the discretion to deny permission to “political or partisan groups or organizations.” This led members of the local school board to ponder whether the League was “nonpartisan,” an issue that could readily have been clarified through perusing the relevant IRS records.

As it turned out, only our Lafayette chapter was denied. Our Caddo-Bossier, St. Tammany, and New Orleans chapters conducted events and drives in schools to great success. We have a new chapter, LWV of Iberia, that is looking forward to registering students, and a chapter that may form in Tangipahoa Parish to do the same. But with our Lafayette chapter shut out of the schools, even as other chapters are in them, it appears that the Secretary of State’s “guidance” has been applied unevenly around the state in a way that benefits students in some locales more than others. We have also heard that the in-school program in Lafayette is being conducted by social studies teachers, some of whom steer the students toward political parties.

On the “how” side, we are wary of any registration regime that could be used arbitrarily to deny permission to individuals or groups seeking to do voter registration drives. While we would expect that our distinguished record of voter registration at the League of Women Voters would allow us to register without incident, other organizations might be denied. Moreover, the League currently only conducts registration in six parishes. We are eager to support groups who may do drives alongside us where we are active and in parts of the state where we are not. There are also highly questionable drives in some places, such as at a New Iberia arts fair last fall where organizers prided themselves on registering voters for a particular gubernatorial candidate and asked what party registrants were selecting. There are, it turns out, some bad registration actors out there.

We also have strong concerns about how the bill would be applied in various contexts. Last year, the Commissioner of Elections described in testimony on HB490, a bill originally intended to remedy the problematic implementation of Act 624, how a Catholic high school in Baton Rouge had not delivered a sizable stack of paper voter registration forms, resulting in students being disenfranchised. But many organizations, including the League, are now assisting voters to register on their own phones or sometimes a computer provided by a school. If there is an electronic glitch and the registration fails, will the registering individual or organization be at fault? Overall, the criminal penalties associated with this bill are severe and would likely deter individuals and groups from registering voters at all, which seems to be the primary intent. We are opposed.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Christian Green". The signature is stylized with a cursive-like font.

M. Christian Green  
President, League of Women Voters of Louisiana  
Chair, LWVLA Voting Rights Committee