

2023 Advocacy Wrap-Up



2023 marked yet another exciting and dynamic year for the LWVC. We led many important legislative efforts, arm in arm with our statewide and community partners, commissioned two redistricting reports, participated in numerous coalitions and task forces, and supported federal climate policy efforts.

A host of new districts and open seats paved the way for a [historically diverse](#) California legislature in 2023. While there have been notable improvements in representation - including a record 50 women in office up from 32 in 2022 - there continues to be a gap in representation among women, Latino/a/x and Asian Americans as compared with their share of the state's population. Despite [budget issues](#), the influx of new members also heralded the introduction of 2,632 bills - the highest number in over a decade. **Of those, the League took positions on 77 bills, a 13 percent increase from the same period in the previous legislative session.**

In this year's Wrap-Up, you can read highlights of our hard-earned victories and a preview of some of our advocacy goals for next year. As always, detailed letters related to all the bills on which we took positions may be found in our [Bill Status Report](#).

OUR BIGGEST WINS AND A FEW LOSSES

Strengthening the Fair Maps Act

The “[Promise of Fair Maps](#),” a report by the LWVC and partners, found that local governments often prioritize the interests of incumbent politicians in redistricting, instead of focusing on community needs and using fair criteria to draw district lines. To address these issues we sponsored [AB 764 \(Bryan\)](#), which was signed by Governor Newsom. The new law will prohibit the consideration of incumbent protection, ensure that the safeguards of the Fair Maps Act extend beyond cities and counties to educational and special districts, and make the process more transparent and equitable overall.

However, our victory is tempered by the Governor’s veto of another sponsored bill, [AB 1248](#), which would have required large local jurisdictions to establish independent redistricting commissions before the 2030 cycle. California is nationally recognized for our gold-standard [Citizens Redistricting Commission](#), and the Governor’s [veto](#) represents a missed opportunity to eradicate local gerrymandering. Instead, many communities will continue to face incumbent politicians manipulating the process for their own benefit. This fight is far from over - the League will continue to advocate for independent redistricting commissions in local governments across California to make sure that the power is in the hands of the people, not politicians.

Extending Protections and Convenience to California Voters

As we expand the use of vote by mail, it is critical to ensure the process is equitable, fair and increases engagement. [AB 1037 \(Berman\)](#) and [SB 77 \(Umberg\)](#) are wins that will modernize the way that voters are notified of and correct errors on ballot envelopes, helping to guarantee that every eligible vote is counted, and every voter is heard. Gail Pellerin, the former Santa Cruz County Registrar of Voters, hit the ground running as a new assemblymember, securing a position as Chair of Assembly Elections and introducing a spate of pro-voter bills that have been signed into law. Among the ones that passed, supported by our advocacy, are:

- [AB 545 \(Pellerin\)](#) will make accessible voting more available by requiring all in-person voting locations to offer curbside voting and provide prominent signage and contact information to make sure voters are aware of the ways that voting can be more accessible to them.
- [AB 626 \(Pellerin\)](#) will allow voters to cast the ballot they receive in the mail at a vote center, without the added barrier of the identification envelope. This both makes ballot processing more efficient and respects the choice of those who

prefer to vote in-person where accessibility may be easier and assistance is available.

- [AB 292 \(Pellerin\)](#) provides information directly on No Party Preference presidential primary ballots regarding how to request a partisan ballot and makes it easier to replace the original. This advance is critical because many voters who are registered as No Party Preference are shocked to find that their ballot does not contain primary candidates. Often, voters do not even know they can ask for a ballot that has primary candidates. This bill helps to honor voters' choices and lower confusion and frustration that can lead to lower turnout and distrust in elections.

Democracy in the Balance

In a flurry of dramatic end of session activity, the League helped get [ACA 13 \(Ward\)](#) and [ACA 1 \(Aguiar-Curry\)](#) through the legislature. Both measures are expected to appear on the November 2024 ballot. ACA 13 would require ballot measures that propose to increase the number of votes needed to pass a measure, to also pass by the same increased number. ACA 1 would lower the threshold needed to pass bonds and taxes that fund affordable housing and certain public infrastructure projects from a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to a 55 percent vote. Both constitutional amendments promote fairness in the democratic process.

On the flip side, we were not successful in defeating [SJR-7 \(Wahab\)](#), which adds California to the states seeking an Article V Constitutional Convention on gun violence. While the League passionately supports and engages in focused policy to address gun violence and the damage it is doing to our children and our communities, opening a constitutional convention puts every right, civil liberty, and underlying value of our country at risk. There are no limits or guardrails to what can be changed in the process, and it opens the door to well-funded special interests buying access to change the Constitution to serve their purposes. There are other ways to amend the Constitution that would be more protective of our existing civil rights and liberties and have less risk of being beholden to well-funded special interests.

Open meetings also suffered a setback with the passage of SB 544 (Laird), a bill we advocated against because it weakens Bagley-Keene open meeting rules by stifling people's ability to meaningfully engage with members of state advisory boards and commissions in-person. See [oppose unless amended](#) and [veto request](#) letters. On the other hand, our coalition successfully stopped [SB 537 \(Becker\)](#), which would have fundamentally changed the Brown Act's open-meeting protections for multijurisdictional cross-county local agencies. We recognize that there is a balance to be struck to ensure that public officials with disabilities that prevent in-person attendance are able to serve.

But we also know that AB 2449 (Rubio 2022) already allows for Brown Act exceptions to in-person attendance for members with caregiving responsibilities, health concerns, or a need to travel on official business. Therefore, we urged a step back and comprehensive review of open meetings laws, writing:

The League of Women Voters of California strongly believes that changing open government regulations, when not in an emergency, deserves the focused evaluation afforded by legislative hearings, rather than a piecemeal adoption of situation-specific language. We believe that a comprehensive look into the matter, guided by an explicit mandate to support citizen participation and preserve the focus on transparency and access reflected in both the Bagley-Keene and the Brown Acts, will result in a thoughtful solution that recognizes advantages discovered during the pandemic and benefits both the public interest and that of state and local bodies.

Beating Back Climate Change

[SB 253 \(Wiener\)](#), the Climate Accountability Act, is a groundbreaking advance that will require companies doing business in California to publicly disclose annual greenhouse gas emissions. By 2025 the California Air Resources Board must develop and adopt regulations requiring businesses operating in California with more than \$1 billion in annual revenues to reveal their carbon footprint across three “scopes.” The requirements would apply to an estimated 5,400 companies, including Walmart, Apple, ExxonMobil and Chevron.

In other environmental wins, [SB 49 \(Becker\)](#) will encourage the installation of solar power infrastructure along California’s highways and [AB 43 \(Holden\)](#) will require the Air Resources Board to establish an embodied carbon trading system (the carbon that is created when goods are manufactured) that will help build a market to attract private investment and incentivize improvement of low-carbon building materials. This is expected to reduce total carbon emissions from the building sector.

Criminal Justice Reform Hits Snags

Many of our priority criminal justice bills have been held as two-year bills due to [the complexity of managing opposition and educating new legislators](#) on the need for reform. Among our priority bills, that we hope to address with renewed vigor in 2024, are:

- [SB 94 \(Cortese\)](#) to allow judges to review life-without-parole sentences for people who have served at least 25 years of their sentence, and who may have received unwarranted enhancements to their sentences, to request a recall or possible resentencing. This fresh look by a judge can now consider modern day sentencing practices that were not in place at the time of original sentencing. See also [floor alert](#).
- [SB 50 \(Bradford\)](#) to limit law enforcement's ability to use minor, non-safety-related traffic infractions to conduct racially biased pretextual stops. It will help protect Californians of color from unnecessary harm and help ensure that public dollars dedicated to community safety are being used resourcefully.
- [AB 280 \(Holden\)](#) to, among other things, end the use of solitary confinement for vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities, the elderly, and pregnant women. It would bring California closer to following international humanitarian standards and the United Nations' Nelson Mandela Rules, which define solitary confinement for greater than two weeks as torture.

Housing Victories

In an important win for creating affordable housing, [SB 423 \(Wiener\)](#) will extend SB 35's streamlined building permitting process (which sunsets in 2026), in cities that are behind on meeting state-mandated housing goals, to 2036. The League supported SB 35 (for the reasons stated [here](#). SB 35 has [successfully streamlined approval](#) of over 18,000 new homes since 2017, including over 9,000 affordable to low-income families, 5,500 affordable to very low-income families, and more than 1,000 homes affordable to extremely low income families. SB 423, which also expands the provisions of SB 35 to encourage mixed-income housing developments, will maintain the shortened permit processing times and help increase our housing supply at a time when there is an affordable housing crisis in California. Amendments were taken during the legislative process clarifying that SB 423 would not apply to certain environmentally sensitive or hazardous areas, like those vulnerable to sea-level rise or fires. The Governor also signed [SB 4 \(Wiener\)](#), to ease barriers to educational and religious institutions building affordable homes on their own property. This new law is projected to open up almost [40,000 acres for development](#).

Federal Action

The [League of Women Voters of Fresno County](#), working with the LWVUS and the LWVC, spearheaded a [statewide Action Alert](#) calling on Californians to urge federal representatives to support funding for climate-smart agriculture and conservation technical assistance in the 2023 Farm Bill.

California's agricultural industry employs almost 10% of our workforce, provides more than 50% of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States, and is vital for our nation's food security. Our agricultural lands are also an integral part of the state's climate strategy. Climate-smart agricultural practices build healthy soil, protect topsoil, increase water efficiency, improve biodiversity, increase carbon sequestration, and are an essential tool for farmers to build resilience to drought. Our farmers need assistance to build a resilient, equitable and sustainable food system. To learn more about our policies and work in this area, read the [Climate Smart Agriculture and Food Action Policy](#). Californians and League members can [take action](#) to support the 2023 Farm Bill and protect our agricultural systems right now.

BEYOND BILLS

Our work goes far beyond legislation. Among other things we also advise the work of key state agencies to ensure they meet the needs of Californians, guide effective implementation of legislation, and provide education related to advocacy. Here are just a few of the current projects.

- **Motor Voter Task Force.** In 2021 we passed [AB 796 \(Berman\)](#) to improve the voter registration process at the DMV and help more of the 3 million eligible, yet unregistered Californians register and vote. This year we began our tenure on the Secretary of State's [Motor Voter Task Force](#), established by law to monitor the DMV voter registration process. [The 2022 Motor Voter Annual Report](#) explains the work being done. We are currently advocating for the DMV to add a single optional question to the registration process related to race and ethnicity. Collecting this information would better identify the specific challenges to building a more inclusive democracy and greatly expand our understanding of voter turnout, voting method preferences, and potential obstacles to participation within communities of color in different parts of the state. The need for this data is further explained in [this Op-Ed](#).
- **Redistricting Reports.** The LWVC published two comprehensive reports on redistricting in 2023.
 - The [2020 California Citizens Redistricting Commission's Successes and Challenges](#) is a comprehensive report evaluating both the outcomes and the processes of the state's 2020 California Citizens Redistricting Commission. The report, authored by Dr. Christian Grose, professor of political science and public policy at USC, highlights the successes and challenges of California's 2020 statewide redistricting process, which bore the responsibility of following California's 2010 best-in-the-nation showing and was conducted entirely during the pandemic. The report also offers

detailed recommendations for strengthening the upcoming 2030 redistricting cycle.

- The [Promise of Fair Maps, California's 2020 Local Redistricting Cycle: Lessons Learned and Future Reforms](#), which evaluates the effectiveness of the FAIR MAPS Act and related independent redistricting reforms aimed at encouraging meaningful public participation and promoting the adoption of local maps that better reflect and empower a jurisdiction's diverse communities.
- **Free the Vote Implementation.** We meet regularly with the Secretary of State to explore designating the Division of Adult Parole Operations as a National Voter Registration Act Agency. Doing so would make registration much more accessible to people who are formerly incarcerated and granted voting rights through Prop 17.
- **Fighting Voter Suppression.** We are working in coalition with other organizations to advocate against dangerous actions by the Shasta County Board of Supervisors that were fueled by mis and dis-information and election denialism, You can read our letters [here](#) and [here](#),
- **Our Advocacy Interest Groups** are growing in many areas, including Criminal Justice, Healthcare, Housing and Homelessness, Open Government, Climate Change, and Water - [check the list](#) to join one! They are the perfect place to become educated in issue areas.

LOOKING FORWARD

We have a big year planned ahead and rely on the generosity of League members to sustain our advocacy programs and services. The League is dependent on member donations and your support is what allows us to achieve these goals. Join us in giving and [donate](#) to the Action Fund.

Sponsored Two-Year Bills

The following sponsored measures were introduced this year but will become active in January 2024.

- [ACA 4 \(Bryan\)](#) is a constitutional amendment to restore voting rights to people who are currently incarcerated, Because mass incarceration disproportionately impacts Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous communities, this is both a voting rights and racial justice issue. The League was born from the suffrage movement and this is a critical measure to achieve full suffrage. It is also the next logical step after working to successfully pass [Prop 17](#), which restored the right to vote to Californians who have completed their prison term.

- [SCA 1 \(Newman\)](#) is a constitutional amendment to adjust how state-level recall elections are conducted, so that only one question will appear on a recall ballot asking a voter to decide whether an elected official should be recalled from office. If a recall is successful, the official will be replaced in a manner consistent with existing law if the official were to leave the office for any other reason. This will simplify a process that is confusing for voters and reduce the risk of abuse of the recall election by special interests.

Ballot Measures

The November 2024 ballot is anticipated to include, in addition to ACA 1 and ACA 13 referenced above, the following legislatively-referred constitutional amendments that the League lobbied to pass:

- [SCA 2 \(Allen\)](#), to repeal Article 34 of the California Constitution, thereby removing legal impediments to building low-income and public housing in our cities. Eradicating this antiquated 1950 provision will help California move past redlining and segregation and foster the construction of affordable housing.
- [ACA 5 \(Low\)](#), would amend the California Constitution to repeal Proposition 8's unconstitutional, discriminatory ban on same-sex marriage and provide that the right to marry is a fundamental right.

Shrinking California's Voter Participation Gap

Despite the fact that we are a state where underrepresented groups are a majority, and we have recently passed laws designed to remove impediments and promote access to voting, there are significant disparities in participation among youth and voters of color compared to our older, non-Hispanic white population.

In 2022, the League led a coalition in a first-of-its-kind [Voter Education & Outreach Legislative Budget Request](#), which was [championed by a group of legislators](#). The idea is to use robust voter education and outreach as a tool to shrink the participation gap and create a more representative democracy. We worked with the Secretary of State, the Governor's office, and other stakeholders to build support. An [Assembly Legislative Hearing](#) was recently held to explore solutions; and we have excerpted the testimony of [Alejandra Ramirez-Zarate, LWVC Board Member](#). While we were unable to get the funding incorporated into either the 2022 or 2023 budget, this is a long-term effort and we developed some key relationships and a solid foundation on which to continue the advocacy in 2024.

A WORD OF THANKS

None of this would be possible without the tireless work of our advocacy team and grassroots leaders. We are grateful to you all for helping us significantly impact the well-being of Californians.

We know that 2024 will be here in the blink of an eye, and are ready, focused and determined. The LWVC never wavers in our commitment to empower voters and defend democracy, even as we pause to reflect on another monumental year of strong work. Thank you to our Leaguers who show up for democracy and support the LWVC every day. Onward!