



# Susan Sheridan Tucker, Executive Director, Minnesota League of Women Voters

Counsel from Minnesota's century-long, non-partisan, grassroots civic organization

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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## Present

Steve Alderson, Steven Anderson, Audrey Clay (phone), Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Paul Ostrow (phone), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (phone), Clarence Shallbetter, and Susan Sheridan Tucker

## Summary

Approaching its 100th anniversary, the Minnesota League of Women Voters is challenged by limited resources, difficulty in attracting younger members and those from more diverse backgrounds, and candidates unwilling to share positions on issues, according to Susan Sheridan Tucker, executive director. But the non-partisan organization—with some 1,600 members in 33 units statewide—is continuing its central work on voter-related concerns. Through "Your Voice Your Vote", the LWV is helping high school students learn about the importance of voting and being active in the future of democracy. Local units, such as the Roseville Area LWV report on police service and training, remain active on current issues.

Unfortunately, she said, many people today seem preoccupied with national issues and candidates, which can make it difficult to create interest at the state and local level.

Sheridan Tucker reports that the LWV is increasingly involved in coalitions of organizations to implement its recommendations. A new voters guide sponsored by a broad group of organizations is contemplated.

## Biography

Susan Sheridan Tucker joined League of Women Voters Minnesota as its Executive Director in October 2013. After a stint of independent contracting, Sheridan Tucker wanted to re-engage in an organizational setting. LWV Minnesota offered an opportunity to work with passionate leaders on progressive public policy and to help reshape a legacy organization as it prepares to enter its second century.

A native New Yorker, Sheridan Tucker earned her bachelor's degree in English Literature and Political Science from New York University and her masters in Urban Planning from Hunter College, CUNY. Over her 25 years in the nonprofit field, Sheridan Tucker has worked on affordable housing projects, master plans, community building, strategic planning and nonprofit change management. Cat herding is another skill she obtained while working with MN entrepreneurs. She is active in her church community where social justice issues and pastoral care have been her primary focus. She serves on its' Board of Session. Susan is a former City Commissioner for the Edina Energy and Environmental board.

LWV Minnesota strives to uphold the vision of our founding mothers, protecting voters' rights, engaging all citizens in the democratic process and to stand up for public policies that benefit the whole community.

## Background

Today's interview is part of a Civic Caucus review of the process in Minnesota of identifying, shaping, analyzing and making recommendations on opportunities and problems facing the state. The process involves several different types of groups outside government, including social media, electronic and print media, foundations, scholarly institutions, political parties, think tanks, and civic organizations, including the League of Women Voters.

## Discussion

**National League of Women Voters' roots in Minnesota** —The League of Women Voters (LWV) as a national organization was founded in 1920 by Carrie Chapman Catt, in follow-up to the adoption of the 19th amendment to the U.S. constitution granting women the right to vote, Tucker said. In Minnesota, led by Clara Hampson Ueland, the first president of LWV Minnesota established the League in October 1919, a full 4 months prior to LWV US.

**Educate, advocate, reform** —The LWV has always emphasized equity in all aspects of life, and most recently, LWV-Minnesota has concentrated on voter protection and voter expansion. It is strictly nonpartisan and never endorses candidates. It has advocated at the Capitol on various issues. The trademark of the LWV work is study-consensus on a variety of social justice issues at the national, state and local level. In Minnesota, the LWV has 33 local chapters from the northwest corner to the southeast corner of the state, with about 1,660 total members.

Each of the local chapters functions autonomously on local issues. She highlighted a recent  study of police service and training conducted by the Roseville Area LWV, which covers Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Roseville, Little Canada and Maplewood.

**Urgent need for a more diverse membership** - LWV has not kept up with demographic changes. Their membership is mainly white, middle-aged women. Funders have indicated a desire to see a more true representation of the state's growing diversity. The LWV Minnesota is currently involved in strategic planning that will set its goals and strategies for the next 10-15 years and will include membership recruitment.

**Younger women are interested** —Tucker used an example of her own daughter, in her 20s, to dispute disinterest of younger women. She is in her last year at the University of Missouri, in journalism, and is fully engaged in current issues. Just because social media is popular doesn't mean younger people aren't engaged in civic issues.

**Social media contributing to isolation?** —Widespread use of social media seems to have contributed to individuals becoming more "siloed", she said, that is, going to the media sources that we feel are supportive of our own views. It's harder, Tucker said, to have people engaged in public policy discussion in safe places where they can look at differences in viewpoints, express their own views without fear of retribution, and work toward consensus.

**Special voting education project aimed at high school students** —Tucker highlighted a new project of the LWV Minnesota, called [Your Voice Your Vote](#) that is made possible by a grant from The Joyce Foundation. The project is designed primarily for high school students. Its four purposes:

- \* To highlight why voting rights are so important and how they affect every aspect of our lives.
- \* To focus on the people, not the power.
- \* To encourage deeper thinking about the connections between the past and our present.
- \* To challenge younger generations to get active around the future of our democracy.

While the foundation was generous in getting the project off the ground, it will not provide operational funding, which is producing a challenge for LWV Minnesota to keep the website for [Your Voice Your Vote](#) active, Tucker said.

**Impatience evident in expectations of LWV** —Tucker said an organization like LWV, which stresses education, study, and seeking consensus, can't get its work done overnight. However, there's a lot of impatience in the larger community that expects faster decisions. Patience is essential in the process of analyzing and recommending solutions to public policy problems. In continuing discussion on this point, Tucker said LWV needs to be more nimble so it can respond quicker.

**Need to acknowledge limitations on financial resources** —It's very tough, Tucker said, to talk about expanding, or speeding up, LWV work, because it has a very limited budget. Currently the state office has 2 1/2 full-time-equivalent employees. LWV relies on its volunteers, but as members age it becomes more difficult. The LWV has not been attractive to many younger women. More of them want to be part of multi-cultural groups today, she said. The LWV must be authentic in its welcoming people of a variety of cultures.

### **Less interest on the part of the public state-local—versus national—candidates and issues —**

Agreeing with a questioner, Tucker said it is unfortunate that people seem so focused on national candidates that they are ignoring important state and local issues. To illustrate her point, Tucker related an experience she had recently in visiting with a member of Congress and interns serving that member. To the chagrin of the member of Congress, all interns in the meeting expressed no interest in elections for any office other than that of President.

**Role of Voices for Racial Justices highlighted** —Tucker stressed the contribution [Voices for Racial Justice](#) , in leadership in involving people of color in public policy discussions in Minnesota. A member commented that the challenges are great, given low voter turnout often in precincts with large populations of people of color.

**State Voices group also highlighted** —Responding to Tucker's point, a member mentioned a newer organization, [State Voices](#) , with outlets in Minnesota and other states.

**Paying attention to the process of governing** —A member inquired about the process that legislators follow in considering and acting upon proposals from groups like LWV. The member cited problems that arise when omnibus bills are assembled and when people in power decide that, certain proposals should not receive a hearing. Tucker replied that LWV Minnesota has been heavily involved in such issues. She recalled leadership by Joan Anderson Growe and others on passage of open meeting laws. Traditionally LWV member volunteers sat as observers at state and local meetings.

The [White Bear Lake Area LWV](#) has been making a special emphasis recently on transparency and open meeting laws, she said.

Tucker said that limited financial resources have had the effect of limiting the extent to which LWV Minnesota can be heavily involved in questions. She wishes they could be more involved in challenging the wisdom of omnibus bills, which seem to become dumping grounds for proposals that get included without ever being considered in an open meeting.

She highlighted a recent LWV Minnesota report,  ["Tip of the Iceberg"](#) which points out how campaign finance laws hinder legislative transparency.

**Difficulty in maintaining respect across the political spectrum** —Responding to a question, Tucker said that LWV is strictly non-partisan, but that it has been very difficult to realize a fully non-partisan approach when some legislators won't participate in candidates meetings. LWV Minnesota invites all legitimate candidates to participate in its candidate forums but increasingly finds that some candidates won't participate. Up until this past year, LWV Minnesota and its locals would cancel a candidate forum if only one candidate appeared. This year, they have adopted a new candidate appearance policy for local and state races. As in the past, all candidates are invited to attend the scheduled forums; however, forums will not be cancelled if only one candidate is able to appear. Often incumbents don't want to risk making a public gaff or provide easy comparisons between the candidates to enable the voters to make an informed decision. The FEC (Federal Elections Commission) prohibits single candidates from appearing and LWV Minnesota will abide by those rules for federal elections.

**Possibility of a new voters' guide**— LWV Minnesota was formerly known for its voters' guides that provided background on all candidates for a given office, including their responses to a common set of questions. Unfortunately, Tucker said, the LWV Minnesota had to discontinue the practice because so few candidates were responding to the questions.

Happily, she said, LWV is exploring the creation of a broad coalition of organizations, including media, business, labor, environmental, and other interests, to see if a single statewide voters' guide might be prepared.

**Essential principles in developing public policy proposals** —A member inquired about LWV's positions on essential principles that should be followed in any study, such as who serves on the group, whether proposals are sufficiently detailed to be actionable, and whether efforts are made to compromise with other interests before proposals are adopted.

LWV studies are member driven. The members do all the research, consult with outside sources and prepare the reports. More and more, she said, LWV Minnesota is working with coalitions that have a common interest. She specified the [Restore the Vote Coalition](#), the [Voting Rights Coalition](#), and the [Minnesota Environmental Partnership](#). A heavy emphasis of Restore the Vote Coalition currently is to extend voting rights to former felons.

**Guidance for the Civic Caucus** —A member noted that the Civic Caucus itself is reviewing its future and that today's discussion will help in that regard. Tucker replied that there should be no shortage of civic engagement groups. Any way we can work together is beneficial. We all share the need to attract a broader constituency.

**Importance of bringing young people along early**— Tucker said she vividly recalls her 5th grade teacher, Nancy Kelly, who invited all her students to think about an issue that was important and pursue it. Tucker recalled that she identified the problem of using wild horses as a source for dog food. She recalled writing letters and being patronized by corporations, but it was the moment that she became an activist.

Tucker said that this fall the first [mock elections](#) for high school students will occur, sponsored by the Minnesota Secretary of State. A member commented that it would be interesting if students in high schools were also given opportunity to make proposals on issues of critical importance to them, including their own education.

**Importance of being as specific as possible in studying issues** —A member commented that the word "equity" is justifiably repeated frequently today, but to be helpful, proposals must be clear as to what the precise problems are and what specific proposals will actually accomplish.

**The unfinished business list is long; priorities must be set** —Responding to a question about the need to prepare lists of important public policy questions yet to be resolved, Tucker again mentioned how scarce financial resources have a major constraining effect on how much LWV can be doing at any one time.

**Leaving legislative redistricting to the courts?** —Responding to Tucker's point that legislative redistricting needs attention, a member replied that a system of sorts has worked well in Minnesota, with the federal court drawing boundaries after legislative efforts have failed.

**Scarcity of funding for public policy work** — LWV Minnesota is completely dependent upon individual contributions, a source that is shrinking, Tucker said. It seems as if support is also splintering, as contributions appear to be earmarked more and more for specific studies. Further, she said, studies seem to be focused on interests to the far left or the far right, not on the center, which is where the LWV operates.