



League of Women Voters of Massachusetts
Citizen Education Fund

A project of the Lotte E. Scharfman Memorial Fund

Your Vote Makes a Difference

“It’s not the hand that signs the laws that holds the destiny of America. It’s the hand that casts the ballot.”

–President Harry S. Truman

Your vote does make a difference – whether in a national, state, or local election. Many races have been decided by very few votes.

- In 2000 George W. Bush won Florida’s electoral votes by 537 votes out of 5,963,110 votes cast there, giving him the victory in the presidential election.
- John Liming was elected to the Marblehead, MA Board of Selectmen in 2004 by a single vote.
- One vote gave Larry Rosenblum a seat on the Plymouth, MA Planning Board in May 2000.
- A Lansing, Michigan School District bond issue was defeated in 1989 when the final recount produced a tie vote. As a result, the school district had to reduce its budget by \$2.5 million.
- Campaigning for a seat on the Massachusetts Governor’s Council on the day of the primary election in 1988, Herbert Connolly lost track of time – and got to his polling place too late to vote. The polls had closed just minutes before. When the ballots were counted later that night, he’d lost by one vote.
- One vote gave Patty Cafferata the victory in a 1980 primary election for a Nevada Assembly seat. Her winning margin might have been larger if three members of her family had remembered to vote!
- In the 1974 New Hampshire Senatorial race, Louis Wyman appeared to be the winner by 355 votes. But after a recount, John Durkin was certified the winner by 10 votes. Another recount made Wyman the winner by two votes. After a year of court battles and controversy, a special election was held; Durkin won.
- Marcus Morton was elected Governor of Massachusetts in 1839 by one vote out of 102,066 cast.

Important decisions that affect us all have been made because of very few votes.

- In 2003 Vice President Dick Cheney, as president of the Senate, cast the deciding vote on a Senate tax-cut package amendment that reduced income taxes on capital gains and corporate dividends.

- A tie vote in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1997 defeated a bill to reinstate the death penalty. The tie came about when one representative, who had voted earlier for the death penalty, changed his vote.
- Women won the right to vote in 1920 by the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. Tennessee was the last state needed to pass the amendment. One 24-year-old representative, Harry Burn, changed his vote, and the Tennessee legislature ratified the amendment by a vote of 49-47.
- One vote in the Electoral College elected Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency in 1876.
- One vote in the U.S. Senate saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment conviction in 1868.
- Congress voted to admit Texas to the union in 1845 by a two-vote margin.

Voter turnout makes a difference.

- In the presidential election of 2004, only 47% of the eligible 18-24 year olds voted.
- Voter turnout in 2004 was the highest in a presidential election since 1968.
- Massachusetts ranked 22nd in voter turnout in the nation in the 2004 presidential election.
- The highest voter turnout in a presidential election between 1924 and 2004 was in 1960.
- In 1960, 75% of the voting-age population in Massachusetts voted. In 2004, that number dropped to 59%.

Your vote affects your future and the future of your family, your community, your state and your country.

National security. Taxes. Education. Health care. Jobs. All of these issues, as well as many others, profoundly shape our lives and play a major role in elections. When voting, you're not only helping to elect a candidate; you're also making a statement about what issues are most important to you. You're voting for your own choices and your own future.

Elections have consequences far beyond simply who gets into office. Voting not only selects leaders, but it holds them accountable. Our elected officials will be better able to represent us when we express our values and concerns through voting.

When a large percentage of Americans do not participate in elections, the future of our democracy is threatened. The decisions made by those holding elected office affect us all. Their decisions will have an impact on finding good jobs, how good our schools will be, how much we'll pay in taxes, whether we can afford adequate health care for ourselves and our families, and how ensuring national security is balanced against protecting our civil liberties. All Americans should have a say in making those decisions, and we have our say by voting.

Voting equals power. To use that power well, we must understand the issues that are important to us and the nation.

Here's how to become an active and informed voter who understands the issues at stake in an election.

Find out about voter registration, absentee voting, procedures at the polls and where your polling place is located.

Before you can vote, you must be registered. And then you must get to the polls. Information about voting and elections is easily available on the Internet. The League of Women Voters, a

nonpartisan organization, has an extensive, detailed and easy-to-use website about voting in Massachusetts at www.votinginfo.info. The Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth's election website is at www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleidx.htm.

For information by phone, call the League of Women Voters' Voter Information Phone at 800-882-1649 or call the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Citizen Information Line at 800-462-VOTE (8683). You can also call your town clerk or city elections office. Their phone numbers are in the white pages of your phone book under the name of your town or city. Look for "Town/City Hall," "Clerk," or "Elections Department." The phone numbers and addresses for all town and city halls in Massachusetts are online at www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/electk/clkidx.htm.

You can also email your questions about voting to the League at lwvma@lwvma.org.

Find out who's on the ballot.

To find information about candidates on the ballot in Massachusetts, go to www.votinginfo.info, the League of Women Voters' election and voting website. You can find election information specific to your community at the Secretary of the Commonwealth's website www.wheredoivotema.com.

Learn about campaign contributions.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) has a website that offers information about campaign financing at www.fec.gov/finance_reports.html. You can call the commission at 800-424-9530 or write to 999 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20463.

The FEC, created in 1975, is an independent regulatory agency whose duties include disclosing campaign finance information, enforcing the provisions of the law such as the limits and prohibitions on contributions, and overseeing the public funding of presidential elections.

The Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research group, tracks money in politics and its effect on elections and public policy. You can find out where candidates' campaign contributions come from and who is contributing to which campaigns on its website, www.opensecrets.org. Its phone number is 202-857-0044, and its mailing address is 1101 14th St., NW, Suite 1030, Washington, DC 20005-5635.

In Massachusetts the Office of Campaign and Political Finance, an independent state agency, administers the Massachusetts campaign finance law. Its website, www.mass.gov/ocpf, provides information on finance reports, guides, forms and legal guidance. You can also contact this agency at 800-462-OCPF (6373) or at John W. McCormack Building, One Ashburton Place, Room 411, Boston, MA 02108.

Get involved in a campaign.

You can find contact information for candidates and political parties in Massachusetts on the League's website, www.votinginfo.info, by calling the League's Voter Information Phone at 800-882-1649, or on the Secretary of the Commonwealth's website, www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/elepar/paridx.htm, or by calling the Secretary's office at 800-462-VOTE (8683).

Many candidates have their own websites, which give information about how to donate money or volunteer in the campaign. Volunteers hold signs, call potential voters, process mailings, raise money, help with logistical arrangements and more.