

LWVNM Sustainability Position Study

CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

Introduction

Sustainability is defined as “meeting the needs of the current generation while not impairing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Should League support for any position or action be conditioned on its impact on sustainability?

PRO

Requiring that League support for positions and actions be conditioned on its impact on sustainability will ensure that the League does not inadvertently work against the long-term interests of society. It may also prompt a review of some existing positions. This should not be an onerous requirement.

CON

Implementation of this requirement will require a detailed consensus on what a sustainable society would look like. As many have pointed out, the usual definition, reproduced above, leaves so much to the discretion of the framer of any position or the proposer of any action that it is unlikely that any position or action of the League would fail this test.

Here are a couple of questions whose answers might help you decide whether such a statement would be appropriate.

- Do LWVNM members believe that sustainability may be imperiled by human activities that are stressing Earth’s biological and physical support systems?
- The precautionary principle states that when there is reasonable suspicion of harm, lack of scientific certainty or consensus must not be used to postpone preventive action. Do LWVNM members believe the precautionary principle should be more widely used in public decision-making, for example in dealing with greenhouse gas emissions or genetically modified organisms?

Governance

Do LWVNM members believe that active, educated citizen participation in a democratically organized system of governance is essential for sustainability?

PRO

Of course. The League believes that citizen participation is essential for just about any progress, including moving towards sustainability. But its relevance to sustainability is particularly important. What we see happening currently is a drastic fall-off in citizen participation. Virtually all important decisions are left to elites and “experts” who often serve unsustainable economic and political ends, resulting in the diversion of resources to military uses, perpetual growth in economic production and consumption, privatization of social services such as education and health care, and the fragmentation of civil society.

CON

Of course. The League believes that citizen participation is essential for just about any progress, including moving towards sustainability. The League supports our existing, constitutionally mandated form of representative government. In this system, citizens delegate political authority to elected representatives. It is the job of these representatives to seek out and be guided by expert as well as popular opinion in developing solutions to complicated issues such as sustainability. As proposed, this statement adds nothing to the League's positions.

Here are some questions to help you decide how such a statement might be formulated.

- Sustainability will require some global standards, such as standards for atmospheric emissions and population. How can the development and implementation of international standards be shared with regional and local governments?
- Would reversing the tendency towards the concentration of power at higher levels of government improve or reduce the chances of developing a more sustainable society?
- Should the League take a position on issues related to corporate responsibility? For example, should corporations have legally enforceable responsibilities towards the communities in which they operate as well as to their shareholders and investors?

Natural Resources and Economic Development

Do LWVNM members believe that state economic policies and public finance should be more closely tied to the natural resource base of the economy?

PRO

This is perhaps the part of a sustainability position that would have the most immediate impact on League actions and positions. State government tends to accept advice from well-meaning but conventional financial and economic advisors, not all of whom recognize the limitations imposed by the semi-arid environment of New Mexico, for example. It is under continual pressure from developers, and its subsidies are not always reviewed critically from a long-term perspective. League positions are not unambiguous in many of these areas. A statement such as this would help clarify them.

CON

The League takes a national and international perspective. While local economic ventures that take advantage of the opportunities provided by our natural resources and stunning landscapes are of course desirable, it is much too restrictive to insist that our entire economy be based on these things. Currently, for example, military investment accounts for a very significant proportion of our economy; is the League proposing to discourage that? Isn't it better to regulate the new dairy industry than simply tell them to go away? And while a carbon tax might eventually be desirable, right now there is no alternative to lengthy drives for people in this large state; reforms of this type would penalize our poorest citizens.

Here are some more questions that might help you decide:

- What are the economic limitations imposed by the resource base in New Mexico? What opportunities are provided by resources in which we are rich?

- How can tax and subsidy policies be revised to encourage more careful stewardship of the environmental basis for the New Mexico economy?
- Should public and private development be regulated to ensure that the biophysical limits of the local resource base are not exceeded, in order to preserve the ability of future generations of New Mexicans to meet their own needs? In particular, should a stronger linkage between land use and water availability be enforced?

Social Policies

Do LWVNM members believe that social policies should equip all members of society to participate in and contribute to a sustainable society?

PRO

This is another “of course”. The problems that we face are so enormous that they cannot be left to the “experts” to solve; their solution will require the participation of every citizen. We will need a new social contract that encourages, rather than discourages, citizens to contribute to all aspects of social and economic life. Education needs to explicitly foster the ecological systems thinking that will be needed to solve the problems that confront us.

CON

This is another “of course”. Omit the words “a sustainable” and you have the League’s current positions. Implementation of these existing positions would increase awareness of the changes needed to arrive at sustainability and enable people to work towards that goal.

Here are some things to think about:

- What are the goals of education in a sustainable society? What do these imply for the design of our educational system?
- How does health care contribute to a sustainable society? What does this imply for the design of a health care system?
- The “core economy” is economically productive activity that takes place outside the market and is not measured by traditional indicators such as GDP. It includes all kinds of unpaid household labor and community work, much of it done by women. Economists have estimated its value at 20 to 40% of the total economy. Should the social policies of the League acknowledge and support the core economy as an essential component of a sustainable economic system?