

## What Does "Nonpartisan" Mean?

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As we start a new year, I've been thinking about the terms we use to describe the essential fairness of the League of Women Voters. We call ourselves "nonpartisan", and in a season of marked partisanship, it seems to me that the word "nonpartisan" is sometimes misunderstood. "Partisan," "bipartisan," "nonpartisan," "neutral," "controversial," "civil" and "uncivil" are all words of significance right now, and I'd like to start a dialogue with you about what these terms mean in a practical sense in today's world of hotly contested issues and elections and of sharply contrasting ideologies about the role of government, about the economy, about what it means to be a patriotic American citizen.



The word "partisan" is based on the word "party," and "nonpartisan" and "bipartisan" of course describe variations on that theme. "Partisan" means supporting a specific political party; "nonpartisan" means not supporting any party; and "bipartisan" means drawing together elements from two different parties.

It might seem that "nonpartisan" means neutral, but in fact it does not mean that at all. The League of Women Voters takes positions all the time, based on our studies, and on those issues we are not at all "neutral."

It might seem that "nonpartisan" means "noncontroversial" or "civil", but again, opinions might differ on those as well. Some of our positions are in fact, quite controversial. And while one would hope that all members of the League practice civility, this is, after all, a question of individual behavior, and we are none of us perfect. And it may be that civility, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. (In my rather large family of origin, everyone talked at once. Interrupting was the norm and in fact the only way one could participate in a conversation. As such, it was not a problem for any of us. However, I have learned that when I take that well-learned family trait into society, I am considered rude and inconsiderate.)

It seems to me that the League's credibility requires that we somehow find a way to educate the public about our nonpartisanship - what it means and what it doesn't mean. I don't have an answer for this, but I'd love it if League members would start to think about these terms and talk about them and see if we can't come up with some clarity of what exactly it means to us and how we might convey that to the public.

I would love it if you would e-mail me your thoughts on this, and we will put them into a future *Voter*. Send your ideas to [lwvor@lwvor.org](mailto:lwvor@lwvor.org).