

Correction! LWVSHR Annual Call to Meeting

From: [LWVSHR <communications@theleagueofwomensouthhamptonroads.ccsend.com>](mailto:communications@theleagueofwomensouthhamptonroads.ccsend.com)
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Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach

Correction!
Address of our annual meeting was incorrect on the previous email.
Meeting will be held at New Calvary Baptist Church
800 East Virginia Beach Blvd. in Norfolk.

*Saturday, May 30, 2026,
10 AM to 12:45 PM*

**League Of Women Voters
South Hampton Roads
Annual Meeting**

All members of the League of Women Voters of South Hampton Roads are called to come together to:

- 1) Consider and adopt the Proposed Local Program Position.
- 2) Review and approve the 2024-2025 Fiscal Report and the proposed 2026-2027 Annual LWVSHR Budget.



Where:
New Calvary Baptist Church,
800 East Va. Beach Blvd
Norfolk, VA 23504

When:
Saturday, May 30, 2026
10am to 12:45pm

Register on our calendar
<https://lwwshr.us/events/league-of->

3) Elect officers, directors, and the chair and two members of the Nominating Committee. Members may also give direction to the Board.



Members come together to elect officers, directors, and the chair and two members of the Nominating Committee. Members may also give direction to the Board.

This slate is submitted by the 2025-2026 Nominating Committee of LWVSHR: Merrie Jo Milner(Chair); Esther Whitley; Valerie Stallings; Sally Clarkson; Susan Adams

Officers:

First Vice President: Sally Clarkson
(to serve a one year term July 2026-June 2027)

Second Vice President: Vacant
(to serve a two year term July 2026 - June 2028)

Treasurer: Elizabeth Davidson
(to serve a two year term July 2026 - June 2028)

Directors:

Claire Yoder
(to serve a two-year term July 2026-June 2028)

Nominating Committee Members:

Chair: Merrie Jo Milner
Member: Esther Whitley
(to serve a one-year term July 2026--June 2027)

PROPOSED LOCAL PROGRAM POSITION

The League of Women Voters of South Hampton Roads believes that district voting systems result in better representation of minority populations on city and county Councils which can result in more representation of minority populations on Council and School Boards.

INTRODUCTION:

For the League of Women Voters, Program is the process of study and subsequent consensus to arrive at positions which then guide League members into Advocacy and Action. This results in Positions on all three levels (national, state, and local). League positions can be found on each of the League websites. Our local League votes on our local positions at our annual meetings. We decide whether to DELETE, RETAIN or UPDATE existing positions and whether to adopt any proposed position. Our League may also ADOPT a new study.

ISSUES OF AT-LARGE VS DISTRICT ELECTIONS

1. Representation
2. Turnout
3. Cost of running for election
4. Representation of school boards
5. Representation of city employees
6. Governance
 - Performance
 - Accountability
 - Transparency
 - Citizen participation
 - Public trust

HISTORY

Cities and Counties in Virginia elect local representatives by one of three methods: single member districts, at-large elections, or a hybrid of the two. Jurisdictions with at-large voting elect members without regard to the location of their residence and each member is elected by the entire population. Jurisdictions with district voting are carved into single member districts that are geographically contiguous with approximate population equivalence with one member from each district who must reside in in their district. Some jurisdictions have a hybrid system with some council seats elected by district and others elected as "super wards" encompassing several smaller districts.

These electoral methods trace their origins back to the 19th century. John Fairlie published a seminal analysis of municipal councils in 1904 entitled: "American Municipal Councils." He noted that before the Civil War the system of electing officials by district was "almost universal" and that "These plans..ensure a certain kind of minority representation." After the Civil War at-large systems were adopted in the South effectively diluting the Black vote. In the North at-large systems emerged in the North as urban reform to try to promote the larger concerns of the city. However, the number of jurisdictions using at-large systems declined during the last 20 years of the 20th century after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave a legal basis to contest at-large systems as discriminatory against Black voters. Courts have mandated many jurisdictions to adopt district voting. These cases tend to be successful when a minority racial group is large enough to constitute a majority in a single district and voting is "racially polarized," meaning different races tend to vote for different candidates. Despite this in 2024 68% of cites nationally elect their members at-large. For example, 39 out of 100 counties in North Carolina still have at-large voting systems.

Research has consistently found that nationally, district voting increases representation of both Black and Latino Americans when the minority group is large enough and concentrated enough to elect representatives. Nationally more minority representation has had down-stream effects on increasing diversity of city and county employees and school boards. A higher number of Black and Latino school administrators has led to greater representation of these groups in honors classes. Other policy outcomes such the development of new housing, per capita taxes or a general city-wide perspective on policy may be more common in at-large system. The research does not show a consistent advantage for women, either black or white, in district vs. at-large systems.

Narrowing the focus to Virginia, we looked at the legal basis of systems of local elections. Based on AI search results, there is not a Virginia law stating that all city councils must be elected by district. Instead, Virginia law generally allows cities to determine their own election methods via their charters, and at-large systems (where all voters elect all council members) have remained common, though they are subject to legal challenges under later voting rights acts.

However, a major legal shift occurred in 2021 regarding districts:

- Va. Code 24.2-130 (2021) sets out the standard to determine whether or not an at-large district illegally dilutes the minority vote and therefore constitutes a voting right violation under state law.
- HB 2198 (2021 Session): This law required that if a city or town already imposes district-based residency requirements for council members, those members must be elected only by voters living in that district, rather than by the city at large.
- The Virginia Beach Case: Following this law, a federal court declared Virginia Beach's mixed system (where candidates had to live in a district but were elected at-large) illegal, necessitating a shift to true district-based voting.
- Existing Authority: The Virginia Constitution allows for local governing bodies to be elected by district if established by charter or approved by local referendum.

SOUTHEASTERN VIRGINIA

In Southeastern Virginia all three types of voting systems are represented. This study surveys all of the jurisdictions and evaluates some of the effects on governance in each.

- **NORTHAMPTON COUNTY**

Northampton county is governed by a five-member Board of Supervisors elected by district. This County has had no other system. The county has a population of 12,282 (2020) and is 56% White, 30% Black and 9-10% Latino. The Board is composed of 3 White members and 2 Black members.

- **ACCOMACK COUNTY**

Accomack County is governed by a nine-member Board of Supervisors elected by district. This county has had no other system. Accomack County has a population of 33,413 (2020) with 60.6% White, 25.9% Black and 10.3% Latino. The Board has 5 White members, 3 Black members and one of unknown race.

- **ISLE OF WIGHT COUNTY**

Isle of Wight County is governed by a five-member Board of Supervisors elected by district. The county has a population of 39,444 (2023) which is 69% White and 21-22% Black. The Board of Supervisors has 4 White members and 1 Black member.

- **TOWN OF SMITHFIELD**

Smithfield is governed by a seven-member Town Council elected at large. The Mayor and Vice-Mayor are elected by the members from amongst themselves. The town of Smithfield has a population of 8,729 and is 74.76% white and 17.81% Black. The Council is comprised of six White members and one Black member. The town has a had 4 Black members in its history with one being a long-serving mayor, James Chapman. According to Councilwoman Valerie Butler, "five of the six white Councilors all live in the historic district and are most attuned to the interests of the historic district and to downtown."

- **CITY OF SUFFOLK**

Suffolk is governed by a seven-member City Council elected by boroughs (districts) and a mayor elected at-large. Suffolk is a rapidly growing city of 100,659 (2023) which is 45-46% White and 40-42% Black. The council has 4 White members and 4 Black members.

- **CITY OF PORTSMOUTH**

Portsmouth is governed by a six-member Town Council and Mayor, all elected at-large. The city has a population of 96,793 (2023) which is 51% Black, 36% Black and 5% Latino. The Council has 3 Black members and 4 White members and the mayor is Black.

- **CITY OF NORFOLK**

Norfolk City Council was elected at-large until the 1980's. Until 1977 only two Black candidates were elected to Council, despite a Black population of 35%. Herbert Collins and the NAACP launched a successful court battle to install a hybrid system in the 1980's. Prominent Black judge Joseph Jordan, Jr. and the first Black Council member since Reconstruction actually argued against the ward system. According to his nephew, Rodney Jordan, "he felt that was rewarding the residential segregation."

Norfolk currently has 5 wards, 2 superwards elected by district and a mayor elected at-large. The city has a population of 231,000 (2021) with 41-43% White, 35-39% Black, 10% Hispanic, 11% Mixed races and 3-5% Asian. The hybrid Council has four White members and 3 Black members and a Black Mayor.

- **CITY OF VIRGINIA BEACH**

The City of Virginia Beach presents an excellent opportunity to compare at-large and district voting methods. Virginia Beach merged with Princess Anne County in 1963 creating the modern city of today. With a population of 457,000 (59% White, 19% Black and 7% Asian and a growing Hispanic population) Virginia Beach is the largest city in the state. From 1966 until 2021 an at-large system was in place. Although there were defined districts, they were extremely disparate in population. For example, the Pungo district had a population of only about 830 people. Council members represented a district, but were elected by the city at large. From 1966 until 2021 this system resulted in only three Black people being elected to City Council and none were reelected.

In 2017, the NAACP launched a successful legal challenge based on the Voting Rights Act. The Federal court required the City to use a “special master” to draw the districts. In 2021 ten districts were created with population equalization and one mayor elected at-large. Council members are required not only to live in their district, but only district residents can vote for their Council member. Districts 4, 7 and 10 were designated as minority opportunity districts. Suddenly the demographic makeup of the Council changed. Today there are seven White members, 3 Black members and the mayor is White.

- **CITY OF CHESAPEAKE**

The City of Chesapeake, although settled in the 1600s, incorporated as a city in 1963 with the merger of Norfolk County and the city of South Norfolk. Chesapeake is governed by a City Council elected at-large. Chesapeake's population is 254,997 (2021) with 53.8%-55.1% White, 29.1% Black, 7.7% Hispanic, 3.9% Asian and 9.1% two or more races. The Council is composed of eight council members and a mayor all elected at-large. The composition of the Council has included long-serving Black members including Dr. William Ward who served on the council and then as the Mayor from 1978 until 2004 and Dr. Ella Ward who has served from 2006 to 2026. At least 5 other Black men have served at various times and there are currently three Black members.

EFFECT OF VOTING METHODOLOGY ON GOVERNANCE

1. DISTRICT VOTING INCREASES REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES

Our data supports this premise. In cities and counties with district voting, minority membership is increased and generally reflects the demographics of the community. Accomack County, Northampton County, Isle of Wight County, City of Suffolk, City of Norfolk and City of Virginia Beach are all examples of this. Moreover, when both Norfolk and Virginia Beach moved from at-large to district voting minority representation significantly increased.

Jurisdictions with at-large voting such as Smithfield demonstrate racial and geographic inequality with a clustering of 4 out of 5 Council members in one neighborhood. Portsmouth has at-large voting, but with a Black majority population it does not have the population distribution that would necessarily lead to an improvement with district voting for minority representation.

Chesapeake is an outlier. Despite having an at-large voting system, there has been longstanding and consistent minority representation on the Council and in the office of Mayor.

2. MORE EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION CREATES MORE EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF LOW VOTER TURNOUT NEIGHBORHOODS

In Norfolk the development of recreation centers and libraries, development of flooding resiliency projects and even the placement of public art projects outside of the downtown corridor and predominantly West side has flourished since the change to district voting. In Virginia Beach the change has been so recent that these types of long-term projects are not as apparent. But a new program aimed at youth, Parks After Dark, operates in the all three opportunity districts. Also historical sites significant to the Black community were recently erected (although not by black contractors!).

In Chesapeake the City Council gives more consideration to the concerns of constituents from whiter, wealthier areas. Two recent Council meetings are illustrative: on June 17, 2025, council gave residents hours of time to protest a data center, but on July 15, 2025, Council suspended its own rules to limit discussion of rezoning to allow a natural gas compressor station in a mostly minority neighborhood.

3. DISTRICT VOTING INCREASED REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES OF SCHOOL BOARDS

School Boards in Norfolk, Suffolk, Northampton County, and Accomack County all have membership that reflects their various diverse communities. In contrast jurisdictions that have at-large voting, Portsmouth, Smithfield and Chesapeake have school boards that are heavily weighted toward the majority. In Virginia Beach Black membership increased from one to two members after the conversion to district voting.

4. DISTRICT VOTING IN VIRGINIA BEACH DID NOT LOWER THE FINANCIAL THRESHOLD REQUIRED TO FUND CAMPAIGNS

Our data do not support the idea that limiting the geographical area as in district voting makes it cheaper to run for office. In Virginia Beach campaign spending did not decrease after the change to district voting. State data also does not appear to support lower costs with district voting whether one looks at total costs or campaign dollar per vote.

5. DISTRICT VOTING DID NOT INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT IN VIRGINIA BEACH

Total voter turnout remained stable at approximately 190,000 votes in Virginia Beach overall in 2020 and 2022 and 2024.

6. DISTRICT VOTING DOES NOT OVERTLY INCREASE GERRYMANDERING

Visual inspection of the district maps of the jurisdictions shows them to be contiguous and with a few exceptions, reasonably shaped. Computer analysis of the demographics of the districts is beyond the scope of this study.

Other issues including representation of city employees, ranked choice voting and governance are beyond the scope of this study.

PROPOSED POSITION

The League of Women Voters of South Hampton Roads believes that district voting systems result in better representation of minority populations on city and county Councils which can result in more representation of minority populations on Council and School Boards.

The proposed budget below is submitted by the 2025-2026 Budget Committee of LWVSHR: Valerie Stallings, Monica Cetrone, Sharon Rodier (Treasurer) and has been reviewed by Chris Anderson and Josie Bergstrom Bergstrom (Co-Presidents)

RECEIPTS		BUDGET
Membership Dues		1100
Contributions		3000
Development		1500
Annual Meeting		800
General Meetings		250
Membership Sponsorship		
Storage Unit Sponsorship		400
Other (Grants)		
Total Receipts		7050
DISBURSEMENTS		
Operating Expenses		
Communication		
	PO BOX	360
	Postage	50
	Phone	240
	Web Site hosting	300
	Web Domain hosting	45
	Video Group meetings utility	100
	Membership E-Newsletter distribution tool	84
	Board email/shared file system	605
	JotForm	228
	League text capabilities	100
	League Calendar shared events	100
Operating Expenses:		
	Va. League Shared Insurance	160
	Misc	200
	Bank Fees:	
Property:		
	Storage Unit	396
	League Property Maintenance	0
State/National League		
	Per Member Payment(PMP)	
	PMP for LWV-US (\$32.00,\$16)	
	PMP for LWV-VA (\$16, \$8)	
	League Conference fees	250
	Other Conference fees	100
Membership Services		
	Membership	110
	Unit Supplies	250
	General Meetings	250
	Annual Meeting	800
Voter Services:		
	Outreach	300
	Voter Services	1000
Administrative Expenses		
	Development	300
Total Disbursements		

6-month

Total Disbursements

0320

Net

722

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