

The League and “Real” Facts

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Fake news! What is fake news? How does it affect our democracy? Has it changed Americans' faith in their government and mainstream media? What can we as citizens do about it? What does the LWVOR do to help? Fake news has been in the headlines almost daily since the campaigning began for the 2016 election, making these questions a necessary consideration for any involved American when they listen to, read about, or hear a news story.

Fake news is defined as information published under the guise of being authentic news. A more detailed definition comes from PolitiFact: "Fake news is made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word.*"

There are different types of fake news. Stories, rumors and articles can be intentionally deceptive – stating something as fact when it is not. Humor, as satire, portrays news to be funny or entertaining. A story out of context can be passed along without the full text. Large-scale hoaxes can be reported before they are investigated fully. Newspapers and TV news shows are more likely to slant reporting of “real” facts whenever there is bias.

Social media as a news outlet has made access to all types of stories faster and easier. It is quicker and cheaper than the communication avenues of the past. It has also allowed fake and misleading news to reach greater numbers of people. Fake news stories are usually sensational stories which run the gambit from plausible to outlandish. When the stories are spread, they can polarize groups, discredit officials, and upset the governing process. What we believe affects how we vote, what we advocate for, and how we view fellow citizens.

How, as individuals, do we discern what is truth from what is not? Can the League of Women Voters offer some clarity?

The National League of Women Voters is dedicated to ensuring that all eligible voters have the opportunity and the information needed to exercise their right to vote. Fake news and how it affects voters has become a point of concern for Leagues across the United States, prompting many Leagues to present panel discussions and forums looking for ways to help voters decide what is real and what is fake.

While the Oak Ridge League has not dealt specifically with fake news, its normal outreach through the publication of *The Voter* presents an excellent path to reality. The Observer Corps consists of LWVOR members who attend public meetings such as city councils and commissions, county commissions, school boards and special committees. We then publish their reports in *The Voter*. Although they are not official minutes, the reports describe important votes, discussions and observations, offering the reader some insight into what is happening on these boards. LWVOR puts on Breakfast with the Legislators during months when the Legislature meets. This offers current legislators the opportunity to make statements on issues and answer questions from the audience. Candidate forums offer a direct path to candidates seeking offices. Audience members present questions while listening to and observing the candidates. The general public is always invited to the LWVOR events, while being a member of LWVOR entitles you to receive a copy of *The Voter*.

Dig for the truth and question the source! Seek reliable sources that clearly help cull out the untruths that bombard us daily. If a story or idea is worth repeating, take the time to check it out with the aid of fact checking organizations like FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, the Washington Post Fact Checker, and PolitiFact.com. Then share only the stories and events that you know are true, from responsible sources or personal involvement.

* PolitiFact.com is a project operated by the Tampa Bay Times, in which reporters and editors from the Times and affiliated media, fact check statements by members of Congress, the White House, lobbyists, and interest groups.

Editor's note: Joye Montgomery is 2nd Vice President of the LWVOR board. Since we do not currently have a president, board members will be responsible for the column traditionally prepared by the president. Thank you, Joye.