



To: Senate Government Operations Committee

From: Catherine Rader, LWVVT

RE: S.157, An act relating to expanding the powers of the State Ethics Commission  
S.198, An act relating to an enforceable State Code of Ethics

January 15, 2020

On January 11, 2017, the following testimony was submitted to this Committee, regarding S.8:

*The League of Women Voters has worked for good government for 97 years. We seek transparency, accountability and responsiveness in our public officials at every level.*

*An ethics commission is one tool to help ensure that our officials serve us. An ethics commission would act not only as a monitor, but also as a resource to define what is expected and clarify any ambiguities that are sure to turn up in practice.*

*Therefore, the League of Women Voters of Vermont supports the establishment of an ethics commission.*

*However, to be effective it must be independent. Congress started the session by proposing to reduce the authority of the Office of Congressional Ethics and place oversight in the hands of the House Ethics Committee. Public reaction caused House leadership to walk this back (or at least postpone it). Public reaction was so strong because self-monitoring simply leaves too much opportunity for corruption to be swept under the rug. Keep Vermont Government honest by establishing and independent ethics commission.*

*Vermont's Human Rights Commission might serve as a model. It is an independent agency, with an Executive Director, several Investigators and other staff.*

*The Vermont Human Rights Commission is the state agency having jurisdiction over allegations of unlawful discrimination in housing, places of public accommodation and State employment. Places of public accommodation include schools, restaurants, stores, professional offices, government agencies and other places offering goods or services to the general public. The Commission has four statutorily mandated roles: enforcement, conciliation, education and public policy development.*

*To ensure credibility and integrity, ethics guidelines and enforcement must be under an independent commission. It may cost more, but it would be money well spent.*

*The League urges passage of a stronger ethics bill.*

All of the above is still true. The weak bill passed and a weak Ethics Commission was established. As I recall, at that time VPIRG called it a first step. And a first step it still is. Nothing will be served by starting from scratch.

The LWV has now been working for good government for a century. We still urge passage of a stronger ethics bill, as proposed in S.157

At the very least, a Code of Ethics should be enshrined in state law, and not exist just as recommended best practice. Therefore, the League strongly supports S.198.