

League of Women Voters: Making History

From the spirit of the suffrage movement and the shock of the first World War came a great idea – the idea that a nonpartisan organization could provide political education and experience that would contribute to the growth of the citizen and thus assure the success of democracy. The League of Women Voters was founded on that idea.

In her address to the National American Woman Suffrage Association's (NAWSA) 50th convention in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1919, President Carrie Chapman Catt proposed the creation of a league of women voters to finish the fight and aid in the reconstruction of the nation. A League of Women Voters was formed within NAWSA, composed of the organizations in the states where woman suffrage had already been attained.

The next year, on February 14, 1920 – six months before the 19th amendment to the Constitution was ratified – the League was formally organized in Chicago as the National League of Women Voters. Catt described the purpose of the new organization:

The League of Women Voters is not to dissolve any present organization but to unite all existing organizations of women who believe in its principles. It is not to lure women from partisanship but to combine them in an effort for legislation which will protect coming movements, which we cannot even foretell, from suffering the untoward conditions which have hindered for so long the coming of equal suffrage. Are the women of the United States big enough to see their opportunity?

Maud Wood Park became the first national president of the League and thus the first League leader to rise to that challenge. She had steered the women's suffrage amendment through Congress in the last two years before ratification and liked nothing better than legislative work. From the very beginning, however, it was apparent that the legislative goals of the League were not exclusively focused on women's issues and that citizen education aimed at all of the electorate was in order. For more than 80 years, the League has helped millions of women and men become informed participants in government. And it has tackled a diverse range of public policy issues.

In fact, the first League convention voted 69 separate items as statements of principle and recommendations for legislation. Among them were protection for women and children, rights of working women, food supply and demand, social hygiene, the legal studies of women, and American citizenship. The League's first major national legislative success was the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act providing federal aid for maternal and child care programs.

In the 1930s, League members worked successfully for enactment of the Social Security and Food and Drug Acts. In 1934, when federal and state government agencies were hiring thousands of employees to administer the new social and economic laws, the League launched a nationwide campaign in support of the merit system for selecting government personnel. The League was the only national organization acting consistently for the merit system in those years. And due at least in part to League efforts, legislation passed in 1938 and 1940 removed hundreds of federal jobs from the spoils system and placed them under Civil Service.

During the postwar period, the League helped lead the effort to establish the United Nations and to ensure U.S. participation. The League was one of the first organizations in the country officially recognized by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization (NGO); it still maintains official observer status today.

The witchhunt period of the early fifties inspired the League to undertake a two-year community education program focusing on the individual liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Next came an evaluation of the federal loyalty/security programs and ultimately a League position that strongly emphasized the protection of individual rights. In 1969, the League was one of the first organizations calling for the United States to normalize relations with China.

In response to the growing civil rights crisis of the 1960s the League directed its energies to equality of opportunity and built a solid foundation of support for equal access to education, employment and housing. In the early 1970s, the League addressed the issue of income assistance and also began its efforts to achieve a national Equal Rights Amendment.

Dating back to a 1920s study of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the League's concern about the depletion and conservation of natural resources was rekindled in the mid-1950s with a study of water resources. The League's deep interest in the environment was dramatically evident in the 1970s. The League has since built a sequence of broad national positions on water as well as air, waste management, land use and energy issues.

The League was in the forefront of the struggle to pass the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982 and contributed significantly to enactment of the historic Tax Reform Act of 1986. In the arms control field, LWV pressure helped achieve Senate ratification of the groundbreaking Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1988. In that same year the League also completed a study of U.S. agricultural policy.

Citizen education and a broad array of services for voters were an integral part of the League from its earliest days. In 1920 demonstration classes were organized to explain to newly enfranchised women the proper way to mark a ballot and other technicalities of registration and voting. Citizen schools for the study of principles of government, organized in the League's first year, proved to be highly popular. Many of these schools were conducted in cooperation with universities and colleges.

Later in the 1920s, the League organized institutes to study defects in our system of government and initiated Know Your Town surveys, candidates questionnaires and meetings and nationwide get-out-the-vote campaigns activities that remain a hallmark of the League's

services to the electorate today. Classes also were set up to train volunteer teachers for citizenship schools.

These citizen-directed activities laid the foundation for the countless diverse and creative efforts that make up the League's year-round program of continuing political education today—from the Presidential Debates, local and state debates and candidates questionnaires produced by Leagues throughout the country, to the myriad projects (hazardous waste, voting rights, fair housing, energy education, international trade, and many others) funded through the League of Women Voters Education Fund.

While the League's programs, priorities and procedures have changed over the years to meet changing times, a League pamphlet written in 1919 describes with remarkable accuracy its basic aims today: The organization has three purposes—to foster education in citizenship, to promote forums and public discussion of civic reforms and to support needed legislation.

There is probably no other national volunteer organization in America that inspires such a great degree of commitment from its members. As a direct result of that commitment, the League of Women Voters has evolved from what it was in 1920—a "might political experiment" designed to help 20 million enfranchised women carry out their new responsibilities—to what it is today: a unique, nonpartisan organization that is a recognized force in molding political leaders, shaping public policy and promoting informed citizen participation at all levels of government.

Organization and Membership

In contrast to its basic purposes, the League's structure has undergone some major changes over the years, with the most fundamental changes occurring in the 1940s.

As noted earlier, the League began as the National League of Women Voters, inheriting its structure from the National American Women Suffrage Association. From 1920 to 1946, it was a federation of affiliated state Leagues, most of which had been in existence as state headquarters of the NAWSA. State Leagues were the keystone of the League's structure, with the responsibility for organizing and stimulating the development of local Leagues. By 1924, the National League was organized in 346 of 433 congressional districts. Twenty-three state Leagues and 15 city Leagues maintained regular business headquarters, nearly all with one or more paid staff.

A convention, held annually at first and then later biennially, of the state League representatives selected a program that for many years was national, state and local all in one. Local Leagues were not represented at the conventions. The state League delegates also chose the national officers and directors:

to the latter the Leagues looked for leadership which molded them together into one effective organization. The National Board continued the practice of extensive field work which had been so successful in the suffrage movement. Its members carried the enthusiasm and inspiration for the whole League to the remotest and smallest towns. The League had from the beginning the dual advantages of grassroots and

central thinking, planning and leadership. That the League structure ran somewhat parallel to the structure of our federal system was an additional advantage because it provided experience which made our form of government more understandable.

(25 Years of a Great Idea, 1950)

During its first two decades, the organization concentrated on study and getting needed legislation, leading to national board and staff expertise and legislative successes that overshadowed the goal of political education of the lay citizen. The structure that developed in the departments and committees of the National League tended to build up special interests and specialists in subject matter. But there was a sense that another facet of League purpose—development of the well rounded, effective individual citizen—suffered by comparison.

The depression of the 1930s (the National League's budget was cut in half, necessitating a major cut in staff and services to Leagues) and the onset of World War II brought far-reaching change to the League. Perhaps the most important was that League members started meeting in small groups in their neighborhoods (a creative adaptation to gas rationing) to discuss fundamental issues—the threat to democracy itself and the importance of the informed individual to the success of democracy. Grassroots activity thus was firmly institutionalized as a way of assessing concerns, studying and strategizing.

The 1944 convention wrought major changes in the basic structure of the League, proclaiming it an association of members, rather than a federation of state leagues, and abolishing the department system of managing the various facets of the League program. By the 1946 convention, the groundwork had been laid for further far-reaching changes in the national bylaws.

The organization's name was changed to the League of Women Voters of the United States, and the national program was considerably shortened. Members joined the League of Women Voters of the United States by enrolling in local Leagues in their communities. The local League became the basis of organization and representation in the League, while power was vested in the members. It is in and through the local League that members determine, directly and indirectly, what the League does and how it does it. Members influence League decisions either personally or through representatives at state and national levels by electing leaders, determining how money will be spent through adoption of budgets, choosing program, participating in the member agreement process and by deciding the League's basic rules—the bylaws.

At the same time, a continuing strong role for state Leagues was delineated: they were delegated responsibility for organizing and developing local Leagues and for promoting in the local Leagues' finance programs requisite to further the work of the Leagues as a whole, including transmission of funds adequate to support the national budget.

Later structural changes included the establishment of several Leagues at colleges (from 1948-1956) and of the unit system in 1948, which encouraged the development of small neighborhood-based discussion groups to further the opportunity for member input and participation. In 1972, Inter-League Organizations (ILOs), created in many parts of the country

to deal with regional issues, were added to the formal structure of the League. The 1974 convention amended the bylaws to allow men to join the League as full voting members.

To broaden membership and address the issue of membership decline, the 1982 convention amended the bylaws to permit member recruitment by the national and state levels as well as the local level. Convention delegates also called for the development of a long-range plan for the organization. The plan, which defined the League's mission and outlined goals and strategies for the future, was the subject of spirited debate at the convention. During the 1984-88 period the League's long-range plan was refined and updated, then adopted by the 1988 convention with some modifications. These steps, together with the restructuring and streamlining of League boards, the institutionalization of leadership training and an emphasis on modern techniques of management and communication, are evidence of the League's efforts to adapt to the realities of a changing world and to ensure its place as the leading citizens' organization in the United States.

The League of Women Voters Education Fund and OEF International

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the League established two 501(c)(3) educational organizations which, like the LWVUS, are nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations but, unlike the LWVUS, also can accept contributions that are deductible for income tax purposes. In 1957, the LWVUS board established the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF). The LWVEF undertakes a broad array of citizen education and research efforts, which complement the membership and political action activities of the League of Women Voters of the United States. For example, the Agenda for Security Projects in 1984, 1986 and 1988 underwrote some 150 debates focused on national security issues for U.S. House of Representatives and Senate seats. The production of *The Nuclear Waste Primer*, distributed to more than 100,000 citizens, the 2001 Election Administration survey and DNet, the interactive election information site, are other examples of projects undertaken by the LWVEF in partnership with local and state Leagues.

Although a separate legal entity, the LWVEF is closely related to the LWVUS; in fact, the LWVUS board members also constitute the LWVEF board of trustees. While the LWVEF provides citizen education information to a larger-than-League community, the LWVUS benefits from its research, and the budgets of each organization reflect this relationship. Thus, (1) the LWVEF conducts and funds research on national issues and undertakes educational projects in cooperation with state and local Leagues aimed at providing information and educational services to citizens; (2) the LWVUS conducts and funds all action, membership and organization-related activities; (3) administrative services used by both organizations are shared.

The unique network of local and state Leagues has a multiplier effect in bringing the Education Fund's services to the wider public. Through workshops, conferences and the distribution of publications, Leagues disseminate the LWVEF's research and how-to citizen aids. The LWVEF sponsored the 1976, 1980 and 1984 Presidential Debates and the 1988 and 1992 Presidential Primary Debates, an essential service to voters paralleling the countless nonpartisan candidate forums provided by local and state Leagues at election time.

Many local and state Leagues and Inter-League Organizations (ILOs) use the services of the LWVEF to finance state and local educational projects by raising tax-deductible money. In addition, many state and some local Leagues have established their own education funds, which can accept tax-deductible contributions.

The Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund (CCCMF) was set up in 1947 as a vehicle to expand the League's work and to service requests from women in former totalitarian countries for guidance on the role of citizens under a democratic system of government and for help with civic action programs. In 1961, its name was changed to the Overseas Education Fund (OEF) and in 1986, it became OEF International.

Although established by the LWVUS, the CCCMF and its successor organizations, OEF and OEF International, were always independent, setting their own policies, raising their own funds and carrying out their own programs. The board, too, has always been separate from the LWVUS board, although in the early years many of the CCCMF (and later OEF) board members also served on the LWVUS board. Until the late 1970s all LWVUS board members were among the 40 OEF trustees that elected the OEF Board.

In its early years, the Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund provided citizen education publications for use both in the United States and abroad. Of particular significance to the League was the Fund's work with the LWVUS in developing a series of pamphlets and discussion guides for the Freedom Agenda project. These became the resource materials for League members and community groups on the League's study of the relationship of national security to individual liberty, adopted by the 1954 convention. In the 1950s, OEF began to work with women in Latin America and later in Asia. In the 1980s, OEF International worked primarily in Asia, Africa and Latin America, although its Women, Law and Development program was global.

OEF's efforts have enabled women in more than 20 countries to work together to manage profitable enterprises, increase local food production, overcome legal inequities and organize for community development. Among development agencies OEF was a pioneer in promoting participatory organizational skills, part of its rich inheritance from the League of Women Voters. The OEF ceased operations in 1991 after spinning off several independent organizations to promote various aspects of its mission around the world.

Reading List

A Leadership Library

The Different Drum, M. Scott Peck, M.D., Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987.

In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, New York, Harper and Row, 1982.

Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, New York, Harper and Row, 1985.

On Leadership, John W. Gardner, New York, Free Press, 1990.

League of Women Voters Publications

Order from League of Women Voters of the United States, 1730 M Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20036, (202) 429-1965. Information is current as of 2002. Publications marked with an asterisk (*) can currently be downloaded from the LWVUS website, www.lwv.org

Action Handbook. Basic resource for planning comprehensive, effective advocacy, including lobbying, monitoring and litigation. How to set action goals, develop an action calendar, encourage member involvement and develop community support. 1978, #161, \$1.50.

Catalog of the League of Women Voters. Contains titles of all League publications on such subjects as election services, debates, government, international relations, natural resources, social policy, how to be politically effective and information about the League. #126, free.

**Creating Communities of Inclusion*. Highlights lessons learned by Leagues on creating broad-based community coalitions. Offers models and guidance to organizations and community activists on what works. 1998, #1077, \$3.50 (\$3.00 for members).

**Designing a Voter Education Website*. Designed to provide guidance on League policies and federal regulations that apply to voter education projects using the Internet. #1074, \$2.50 (\$1.50 for members).

**The Diversity Toolkit*. Learn the techniques you can use to build a diverse membership base in your organization. Through practical steps and examples, toolkit users will learn everything from how to create a foundation for change to how to form partnerships with other organizations. 1999, #1090, \$3.50 (\$3.00 for members).