

# The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!

*Compiled by Kay J. Maxwell*

## **Founding and Early History:**

From the spirit of the suffrage movement and the shock of the First World War came a great idea - that a nonpartisan civic organization could provide the education and experience the public needed to 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) 50<sup>th</sup> 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. And so 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 beginning, however, it was apparent that the legislative goals of the League would not be exclusively focused on women's issues and that education aimed at all of the electorate was in order. For almost 90 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.

From the beginning the League took action on its stands; for several years, through effective lobbying, the League got selected issues included in the platforms of both major political parties and worked for enactment of legislation furthering its program goals. Over the years

## The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!

many procedural changes have been made in the way League program is defined, adopted and structured, but through all the changes the basic concept of study-member agreement-action has remained constant.

The League is political, but non-partisan. It never supports political parties or candidates, but it does study issues, develop consensus positions and then actively work to support those positions. As Carrie Chapman Catt noted in 1919, "*Is the (League) political? Certainly, but not partisan. Its members are as free as other women to join and vote with the party of their choice. They make no pledge otherwise in joining the League.*"

### **The 1920s:**

#### **Organization:**

Since the League had inherited its structure from the National American Women Suffrage Association, in 1920 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, and had the responsibility for organizing 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 and 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 League concentrated on study and getting needed legislation passed. All League program at the national, state and local levels was proposed by national Board program departments and standing committees and then authorized by the national convention. The national Board furnished study materials for all national and some state items. This led to national Board and staff expertise and legislative successes that overshadowed the goal of political education of the public at large. 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 - suffered by

comparison.

### **Issues:**

League President Maud Wood Park called the first League program adopted in 1920 a kettle of eels. And no wonder! It contained some 69 items grouped in broad subject areas: child welfare, education, the home and high prices, women in gainful occupations, public health and morals, and independent citizenship for married women! 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.

The League also set up classes to train volunteer teachers for citizenship schools. And the League organized institutes to study defects in our system of government, initiated "Know Your Town" surveys, candidate questionnaires and meetings, and nationwide get-out-the-vote campaigns activities. In 1928 the League sponsored "Meet the Candidates," the first national radio broadcast of a candidate forum. Voters service efforts remain a hallmark of the League's services to the electorate today and laid the foundation for the efforts that make up the League's education program - from candidate debates and candidate questionnaires produced by Leagues throughout the country, to the myriad projects funded through the League of Women Voters Education Fund, which was founded in 1957. (For more information, see the section titled, League of Women Voters Education Fund and Overseas Education Fund.)

## **The 1930s:**

### **Organization:**

The depression of the 1930s and the onset of World War II brought far-reaching change to the League. Membership fell from 100,000 in 1924 to 44,000 in 1934. The National League's budget was cut in half, necessitating a major reduction in staff and services to Leagues. Perhaps the most important change was that because of gas rationing, League members started meeting in small groups in their neighborhoods to discuss fundamental issues. These issues included 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.

### **Issues:**

League members worked successfully for enactment of the Social Security and Food and Drug Acts, as well as the TVA. 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. In those years the League was the only national organization acting consistently for the merit system. 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.

## **The 1940s:**

### **Organization:**

The 1944 convention made 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. At the 1946 convention, the name was changed to the League of Women Voters of the United States, and the national program was considerably shortened.

*This action was based on the League's conviction that if the League was to help democracy succeed by increasing intelligent citizen participation in government, it must choose a restricted program which was suitable to widespread member participation and leave enough time and energy to take such a program to greater numbers. (25 Years of a Great Idea, 1950.)*

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 bylaws.

At the same time, a continuing strong role for state Leagues was delineated. They were given responsibility for organizing and developing local Leagues and for promoting finance programs in the local Leagues 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, between 1948 and 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.

### **Issues:**

During the post World War II 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 and has special consultative status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The League also supported the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as NATO, economic aid to less developed countries and the Marshall Plan.

The Overseas Education Fund was established in 1947. (For more detail, see the section titled League of Women Voters Education Fund and Overseas Education Fund.)

## The 1950s:

### Organization:

Delegates to the 1954 convention voted to group League program into **Current Agenda** ("CAs") government issues chosen for sustained attention and concerted action, and **Continuing Responsibilities** ("CRs") positions on governmental issues to which the League had given sustained attention and on which it could continue to act. In 1951, "The National Voter" magazine was first published and in 1957 the League of Women Voters Education was established. (For more detail, see the section titled League of Women Voters Education Fund and Overseas Education Fund.)

### Issues:

The witch hunt 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 1955 League President Percy Maxim Lee testified before Congress against Senator Joseph McCarthy's abuse of congressional investigative powers. *"I believe tolerance and respect for the opinions of others is being jeopardized by men and women whose instincts are worthily patriotic, but whose minds are apparently unwilling to accept the necessity for dissent within a democracy."*

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 1960s:

### Organization:

The 1966 convention redefined program as "those governmental issues chosen for concerted study and action." This change made it possible to have program without the "CA" and "CR" categories, and at the convention in 1968 the program was adopted without categorizing issues. Membership reached a high point in 1969, with almost 157,000 members.

### Issues:

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. The League also added apportionment to its national program and

supported presidential suffrage for the residents of Washington, DC. In 1969, the League was one of the first organizations calling for the United States to normalize relations with China. The League also hosted an exchange with women from the USSR and the OEF Institutes for Latin American women were inaugurated.

## **The 1970s:**

### **Organization:**

In 1970 the national bylaws requirement for adopting a not-recommended item was changed from three-fifths to a simple majority. “CAs” and “CRs” were dropped from the bylaws, and the national program appeared as one list of issues discussed, amended and adopted at national conventions every two years.

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 also amended the bylaws to allow men to join the League as full voting members.

### **Issues:**

In the early 1970s, the League addressed the issue of income assistance and also began its efforts to achieve a national Equal Rights Amendment, an effort which ultimately failed. The League also adopted a position on direct popular election of the President, on Congress, on the UN and on Campaign Finance. And, in 1976, the League sponsored the first televised presidential debates since 1960, resulting in receiving an Emmy award.

The League’s deep interest in the environment was dramatically evident in the 1970s and it has since built a sequence of broad national positions on water, as well as air, waste management, land use and energy.

## **The 1980s:**

### **Organization:**

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, leadership training and an emphasis on modern techniques of management and communication, were evidence of the League’s efforts to adapt to the realities of a changing world and to ensure its place as the leading civic organization in the United States.

### **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. It also adopted a position on fiscal policy and one on US Relations with Developing Countries. 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. And through the Agenda for Security Projects in 1984, 1986 and 1988, the League underwrote some 150 debates focused on national security issues among congressional candidates. The League also sponsored Presidential Debates in 1980 and 1984, but withdrew as a sponsor of General Election debates in 1988. In 1983 the League adopted a position on public policy on reproductive choice.

### **The 1990s:**

#### **Organization:**

At the 1996 convention, bylaws changes were made to simplify the process of forming new Leagues by eliminating the provisional League category, and set the procedure for proposing adoption or amendment of an LWVUS position by concurrence on the floor of convention. The LWVUS Future Planning process was also launched at that convention.

At the 1998 convention, the bylaws were amended to provide for communication vehicles other than “snail” mail!

A nationwide brainstorming effort, the Crossroads Project, on the future of the League was set in motion at the 1992 convention, and the resulting recommendations were presented to convention 1994. A 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Membership Campaign was launched in 1994 and included a new member video, “75 Years of a Great Idea”.

#### **Issues:**

Members adopted a position on gun control in 1990 and Congress passed reauthorization of the Clean Air Act, capping a ten-year legislative campaign. The League also launched “Take Back the System”, a voter campaign to reclaim government and elections and sponsored a Presidential Primary Debate in 1992. In 1993, the League adopted a position on health care and won passage of the National Voter Registration Act, better known as Motor Voter.

In the last years of the decade, the issue for emphasis, Making Democracy Work, included increasing voter turnout, campaign finance reform, civic education, diversity of representation, civic participation and voting representation for the residents of the District of Columbia. During that same period LWVEF activities included Running and Winning, a program that encouraged young women to consider careers as political leaders, as well as community dialogues on water resources, energy and health care.

Following the end of the Cold War, the League began several international programs: hosting



## The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!

emerging women leaders from Poland and Hungary; Strengthening Women's Rights in the NIS; Voices for Women – Forces for Change: Women's Leadership Workshops for Russia and Belarus; Voices for Women – Forces for Change: Building Peace in the Bosnian Community; a Bosnian Citizen Get-Out-The Vote Campaign; and Woman Power in Politics: Building Grassroots Democracy in Africa.

In 1998 the Democracy Network (DNet) was tested and then launched nationwide in January 2000. This Internet web site was a major effort to provide information regarding elections to citizens across the nation.

## The 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

### Organization:

A hallmark of the new century was the commitment on the part of the League to increased use of electronic communication to League leaders across the nation. A monthly electronic newsletter was begun and the League's membership database became available electronically for direct updating by League membership chairs.

At convention 2000, the per member payment (PMP) for student members was set at one half the regular rate and direct member input on program planning was implemented. For the first time, membership brochures were produced in Spanish and in 2004, the League received the Civic Change award from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change.

### Issues:

Beginning in 2000 Issues for Emphasis were no longer selected at conventions and, at the 2000 convention, the League adopted a concurrence to add support for restoration of the federal payment to the District of Columbia. The League offered the first "candidate debates" online through the League's Internet based voter education program, DNet. DNet ended in 2005, but was replaced by the even more effective voter education web site, Vote411, in 2006. The League adopted updated positions on Trade and the UN in 2001 and 2002, an updated position on election of the president in 2004, as well as a concurrence in support of the abolition of the death penalty and a study of immigration policies at convention 2006.

The League was instrumental in the enactment of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 and the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002. The League worked to renew the Voting Rights Act, and filed a number of amicus briefs relating to campaign finance reform issues, racial bias in jury selection and Title IX. Beginning in 2004, the League focused its legislative work under a "Democracy Agenda" umbrella that included redistricting, civil liberties, campaign finance reform, voting rights for District of Columbia residents, election administration reform and ethics and lobbying reform.

The League launched a nationwide voter education campaign on "5 Things You Need to Know on Election Day" in 2004 that was repeated in 2006. In addition, the League engaged in a multi-year education project on Judicial Independence. A major effort was the Local Voices Project that fostered a dialogue on the critical issue of balancing homeland security



and civil liberties.

The League continued its international work through several Global Democracy Programs that included working with women in Africa, Brazil, Ukraine and Russia. In addition, the League participated in a number of programs that focused on increased understanding of international affairs on the part of Americans.

## **The League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) and the Overseas Education Fund (OEF)**

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the League established two 501(c)(3) educational organizations that, 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.

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 the public; (2) the LWVUS conducts and funds all action, membership and organization-related activities; and (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 LWVEF's materials. The LWVEF also sponsored the 1976, 1980 and 1984 Presidential Debates and the 1988 and 1992 Presidential Primary Debates.

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 were

## The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!

always independent, setting their own policies, raising their own funds and carrying out their own programs. The board, too, was always 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 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.

### **Conclusion:**

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.

*“Over the years, the League has also been a training ground for women who want to serve in public office. In fact, the League's ability to prepare women for public life may be its finest legacy to the nation.”*

*(Nancy Neuman, President, LWVUS, 1986-90).*

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.

The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!



## The League of Women Voters Through the Decades!

### **League History Reference Materials:**

1. "Twenty-Five Years of a Great Idea", LWVUS, 1950.
2. "Forty Years of a Great Idea", LWVUS.
3. "For the Public Record, A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters", Barbara Stuhler, 2003.
4. "In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970", Louise M. Young, 1989.
5. "Papers of the League of Women Voters, 1918-1974", Library of Congress Research Collections in Women's Studies.
6. "Impact on Issues: 2004-06: A Guide to Public Policy Positions", LWVUS, 2005.
7. "Recollections", Percy Maxim Lee, 1984.

April 2007  
Compiled by Kay J. Maxwell