The Role of the League of Women Voters in Oregon

“More Power Than We Knew”

1920-2012
Recent League Milestones

2010

90th anniversary of the League of Women Voters

2012

100th anniversary of woman suffrage in Oregon
Changing with the times...
The long road to suffrage in Oregon

1871 Abigail Scott Duniway and Susan B. Anthony undertake lecture tour and petition campaign for equal rights

1872 Petition taken to Salem; suffrage bill fails

1873 Duniway forms Oregon State Equal Suffrage Association (OSESA)

1884 First attempt to pass constitutional suffrage amendment fails
1900  *Oregonian* editor, Harvey Scott, opposes amendment; second attempt fails
1905  National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) meets in Portland
1906  Suffrage linked to temperance effort; third attempt fails
1908  Fourth attempt fails
1910  Fifth attempt fails
1912  Suffrage amendment passes in Oregon!
Before the League of Women Voters

- Oregon State Equal Suffrage Association (OSESA)
- Oregon branch of the National Council of Women Voters: (organized in Tacoma in 1911, a NAWSA affiliate)
- Oregon Equal Suffrage Alliance, organized in 1915 by Dr. Esther Pohl Lovejoy
- Equal Suffrage League, University of Oregon
- Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (originally a NAWSA committee; became the National Woman’s Party in 1916)
The rest of the country catches up

1916  Carrie Chapman Catt elected NAWSA president; national effort replaces state-by-state approach

March, 1919  NAWSA call to convention invited:
“the women voters of the fifteen full suffrage states...to join their forces in a League of Women Voters, one of whose objects shall be to speed the suffrage campaign in our own and other countries.”

May, 1919  House passes 19th Amendment

June, 1919  Senate passes 19th Amendment
Last hurdle: ratification

Fall, 1919  Carrie Chapman Catt attends luncheon of Suffrage Alliance at Multnomah Hotel in Portland; urges support of new organization to educate and energize new electorate

Ratification efforts by Alliance:
- Letter-writing campaign
- Speaker’s bureau
- Pressure on Governor Olcott to call special session
- Appeal to new Oregonian editor

January 12, 1920  Oregon ratifies 19th Amendment
Who’s in charge?

League of Women Citizens
- Organized by Effie Simmons, delegate to 1920 NAWSA convention
- Goal: change organization’s name and admit men
- Mrs. Charles Curry elected first president

Oregon League of Women Voters
- Incorporated by first president, Maria Hidden
- Later dissolved, but name still registered until 1935 legislative action
Mayor and rival leaders spoke to crowd of 300
Tribute to Abigail Scott Duniway.
“Radical” National Women’s Party members not made welcome
Helen Ekin Starrett (attendee of first national suffrage convention in 1869) wrote song for the occasion.
Mrs. C.B. Simmons (Effie)  
Honorary First President
The fledgling League

- First Leagues organized in Portland, Salem, Albany, Corvallis, Forest Grove, McMinnville, Marshfield, North Bend, Roseburg, Grants Pass, Medford
- Denounced as a “nonpartisan party, sure to cause dissension between men and women”
- Legislative goals considered “socialistic” and unpatriotic
- Ongoing question: stay educational or retain program committees (later called “departments”)
Topics of the 1920s

- Living conditions of the “foreign population”
- Tuberculosis control
- Aid to mothers and infants
- U. S. membership in the World Court
- Ratification of a national child labor amendment
- State judicial system
- Hydro-electric power
- Abolition of common law marriages
The Depression years

- Studies: tax limitations, teacher tenure, vocational education, immigration, disarmament, employment discrimination, state budget, school finance
- Women’s issues: girl’s industrial school, majority age of 21, premarital exams, jury duty equity, birth control, opposition to ERA (considered threat to minimum wage and working hours legislation)
- Opposition to misuse of Common School Funds
The war years

- Support of Lend-Lease
- Broadsides: “Agricultural Child Labor During War” and “Oregon’s Mental Hospitals Are a Disgrace”
- Modernizing County Government study
- “CAs”: Improving Oregon’s Tax System, Reforestation and Conservation, Coordination of Services for Delinquents and Pre-delinquents
- “CRs”: Meat and Milk Inspection, Juvenile Court Procedures, School Tax Equalization
A “subversive” organization

1947 Walt Disney called LWVUS a “Commie front organization” in HUAC testimony

1950s Oregon League accused by American Legion and DAR of being un-American

1960s Conservative groups in Oregon called League support of school district reorganization and UN a “step on the way toward world government”
Membership ebbs and flows

1930  25 study groups
1948  13 Leagues; 2,000 members (Portland had over 1,000 members, 4th largest in U.S.)
1957  15 Leagues; 2,054 members (Portland had 1,400 members)
1961  20 Leagues
1970  16 Leagues; 2,060 members (Portland’s membership declines to 518; others grew)
1981  21 Leagues; 1,836 members (Portland’s membership down to 297)
2011  14 local Leagues; 1,047 members (186 Portland members)
Action—taking the long view

1953  Redistricting and revising the state Constitution
1955  Equitable distribution of educational resources, air quality
1959  Urban growth issues
1963  Oregon’s tax system
1967  Opposition to sales tax
1970s Environmental quality, land use, energy, water policy, Roe v. Wade, ERA
1975  Campaign finance reform
1981  Statewide judicial system
1983  Support of sales tax
1987  Mental health services
1980s School funding
Landmark dates in Voter Service

1981 to 2000  Vote-by-mail instituted in Oregon
1991    Motor Voter implemented
1992    Telephone hot line set up for campaign advertising complaints
1998    148,000 free Voters’ Guides distributed
2000    410,000 free Voters’ Guides distributed
2000s    Voters’ Guide expanded to Spanish, audio, large print, easy-to-read, Braille, and online versions
2002    Oregon Student Mock Election for middle and high schoolers
2009    “Video Voters’ Guide” of Washington County League becomes statewide project
2010    Vote411.org enables personalized ballot information; online voter registration
Recent Studies

- Funding Oregon (2004)
- Oregon Parks System (1999)
- Farmworkers in Oregon (2000)
- Measure 11’s Effect on Juvenile Justice (1994)
- Oregon’s Initiative System (2001)
- Mental Health in Oregon (2001)
- Homeless Youth (2006)
- Oregon Judiciary (2006)
- Redistricting (2007)
- Water in Oregon (2009, 2010)
- Coastal Issues (2012)
League history highlights

1951    Change from annual to biennial state conventions
1974    Full membership for men
1980    Formation of LWVOREF
1980    Formation of CRRILIO (dissolved in 2009)
1987    First LWVOR legislative lobbyist
1995    75th anniversary gala event, Benson Hotel
1996    First website
2006    Partnership with SOS on Voters’ Guides
2007    Election of LWVOR co-leaders
2008    LWVUS Convention, Portland