



**SIXTY
YEARS**

**of a
great idea**

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

On February 14, 1920, six months before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, delegates from the National American Woman Suffrage Association met for a victory convention in Chicago. With the realization of votes for women close at hand, they held a jubilant celebration, the greatest—and the last—of the suffrage conventions.

It was the official beginning of the League of Women Voters.

NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt, in her convention address, proposed the creation of a League of Women Voters to “finish the fight” and to aid in the reconstruction of the nation. While the fight for suffrage soon ended, the League has continued to serve the nation for 60 years. As Mrs. Catt told convention delegates that year:

“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 create sex antagonism but to develop cooperation between men and women. 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?”

Maude 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 women’s issues and that citizen education aimed at all of the electorate was in order. In its sixty years of service, the League has helped millions of men and women become informed participants in government. And it has tackled a diverse range of public issues.

In fact, the very first League convention voted 69 separate items as statements of principle and recommendations for legislation. Among them were support for collective bargaining, child labor laws, a minimum wage, a joint federal-state employment service, compulsory education, equal opportunity for women in government and industry. Disturbed by the high maternal and infant death rate, the League pushed actively for the Sheppard-Towner bill providing federal aid for maternal and childcare programs. This action landed the League in a savage battle with those who believed federal funds should not be used for social

welfare programs. In spite of opposition, the Sheppard-Towner Act was passed in 1921; it was the first major national legislative success for the League—and the League members gained a great deal of experience in the process.

During the 1930s this experience stood League members in good stead as they worked successfully for the passage of the Social Security and Food and Drug Acts. The Depression of that decade induced federal action on the socioeconomic front that encompassed many original League goals: the Wagner-Peyser Act establishing public employment offices (1933), federal old-age assistance (1936), U.S. membership in the International Labor Organization (1934), and child-labor provisions in the Wages and Hours Act (1938).

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.

Early League policy in the international field had far-reaching consequences as events unfolded in the 1930s. At its 1923 convention, the infant League eschewed the prevailing attitude of isolationism as “neither wise nor possible for this nation.” And when the League of Nations failed to deter the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the League of Women Voters was convinced that the system would have been stronger had the United States been a part of it. Recognizing a potential precedent for further acts of international aggression, the League in 1932 took a firm position in support of U.S. membership in the League of Nations.

The League continued to work for U.S. membership in the World Court and to muster support for disarmament. In 1932, a League representative presented a trunkful of signed petitions to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva. The League also worked for implementation of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which renounced war as an instrument of national policy, as it had worked for its ratification in 1929. And in 1937, it began its consistent support for each renewal of the Trade Agreements Act. Since then, the League has worked for every major piece of trade legislation always supporting measures that are trade expansive rather than trade restrictive.

The League of Women Voters opposed the principle, embodied in the Neutrality Acts of the late 1930s,

United States should treat all belligerent nations equally. As a proponent of the principle of collective security, the League thought that the United States should not discriminate against aggressors. After war broke out in Europe and President Roosevelt declared a national emergency in May 1941, League members rallied around a "Battle of Production," expressing support for the U.S. policy of aiding the defense effort. By December 1941, the League of Women Voters had adjusted from a defense effort to a support of the "Battle of Production" quickly became "The Service."

The League's primary effort during the war years was to provide support for price controls, rationing and income taxes. But even as war raged, League members already had their sights on the future—world reconstruction and postwar organization for the future. In 1944-45, the Dumbarton Oaks proposals for the establishment of the United Nations became the focus for the most vigorous citizen education effort undertaken by the League. And in the years following the war, the League has continuously advocated a foreign policy based on strong support of the United Nations, freer world trade, and a U.S. foreign aid program that improves the quality of life for the people of underdeveloped countries.

In the postwar period of the late '40s and '50s, the League essentially gave equal billing to international and domestic subjects. The League supported the Executive Reorganization Act of 1945 empowering the President to proceed with reorganization plans for departments and agencies, subject to a congressional veto. It was also one of the foremost organizations backing the Reorganization Act of 1949, which strengthened the structure and powers of Congress. And in order to develop public support for a stable fiscal policy, the 1948 League Yearbook adopted a study of federal taxes and expenditures.

The "witchhunt" period of the early fifties inspired the League to undertake a two-year community education program that focused on the individual liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Next came a study of the federal loyalty/security programs and, finally, a League position that strongly emphasized the protection of individual rights.

In the ensuing postwar years, rapid urbanization created the needs for social services. State and local leagues studied budgets and revenue sources; they researched and then acted on problems related to education, child welfare, housing, urban planning and zoning, and police protection. By the '60s, the growing civil rights crisis added a new dimension to the problems of the nation's

communities and, in response, the League directed its energies to "equality of opportunity." At its 1964 convention, the League adopted a national human resources program with an initial focus on education and employment. Leagues in the subsequent two years examined the problems of poverty and discrimination—unemployment, under-employment, and inequities in public school education. During the rest of the turbulent '60s, the League built a foundation of support for equal access to education, employment and housing.

Local Leagues swung into action in all areas of the country. Leagues spoke out on the need for fair housing and a greater housing supply for low-income families. Leagues also tackled the controversial issue of better racial balance in the schools. Others worked for programs to improve the conditions of migrant workers in their areas. They also supported fair employment practices or sponsored employment clinics in predominantly black high schools. Because of the work done at the community level, the League was able to provide valuable first-hand accounts at congressional hearings on the need for federal antipoverty programs. And the citizen pressure brought to bear on Congress by the League and other organizations gave the 1967 Economic Opportunity Amendments the strongest bipartisan congressional support since the

The League of Women Voters Education Fund

Founded in 1957 as a citizen education and research organization, the League of Women Voters Education Fund complements the membership and political action activities of the League of Women Voters of the U.S. It provides local and state Leagues as well as the general public with research, publications and other educational services, both on current issues and on citizen participation techniques. The network of local 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.

On the national level, the Education Fund's historic 1976 and 1980 Presidential Debates paralleled the voters service that local and state Leagues provide at election time with their candidate meetings. The forums were the first series of their kind presented prior to the primaries, and the debates marked the first time in more than 16 years that presidential candidates met in face-to-face discussions.

program's start in 1964.

Another crucial issue challenged the League in the 1960s—U.S. relations with Asia's largest and most populous country, the People's Republic of China. At its 1966 convention, the League responded to the growing U.S. involvement in Asia by deciding to make a two-year evaluation of U.S. relations with China. League members undertook their evaluation just as both Congress and the Executive Branch had begun to take a new look at U.S.-China policy for the first time in over a decade. And in April 1969, the League first announced its China position, calling for the normalization of relations with the Chinese and the end of U.S. opposition to representation of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations. Praised by the *New York Times* as making "eminent good sense," the League's position on U.S.-China relations was both forward-looking and attuned to political realities.

On into the 1970s, the League has consistently acted to support federal programs and policies aimed at combating poverty and discrimination. The League added income assistance to its list of priorities in January 1971. In May of 1972, delegates to the League's national convention overwhelmingly approved support for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. They saw "equal rights for all regardless of sex" as a fundamental and necessary elaboration of the League's long-term support for equal opportunity in education, employment and housing. Since that day in May, the League of Women Voters has been in the forefront of ERA ratification efforts at the state and national levels.

The League's deep interest in protecting environmental as well as human resources was similarly evident in the 1970s. 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-50s with a study of water resources. The League has since built a sequence of broad national positions on water as well as air, solid waste, land use and energy issues, which are now under the overall heading of Natural Resources. Leagues have translated these positions into action in states and localities across the country. During the past decade, League members have tackled such problems as public transportation, siting of power plants, maintenance of air quality standards, solid waste disposal, the disposal of hazardous substances, and ways to encourage conservation.

The protracted Watergate crisis of the mid-'70s and mounting concern over spending abuses in congressional and presidential campaigns underscored a long-standing League conviction: that government at all levels must be accountable, accessible to citizens and

protective of their rights. Reflecting this principle, the League lobbied intensively for the campaign reforms embodied in the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974. League action on other critical government issues during the seventies included support for congressional budget reform, open meeting laws, amendments to extend the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the direct popular vote method for electing the President and Vice-President.

The League of Women Voters, born in the suffrage movement of the '20s, also continued in the '70s to seek redress for another disenfranchised group—citizens of the District of Columbia. The League adopted a position for District voting representation in Congress and the electoral college in 1924 and for District self-government in 1938. Realization of these goals has been slow, but in the past two decades DC residents have made important gains in the long drive for full citizenship rights. League action and perseverance culminated on the national level in 1978 with the passage of an amendment providing full voting representation in Congress for DC citizens. Today, state and local Leagues are at the forefront of the DC voting rights drive as state legislatures move through the ratification process.

While the League's programs and priorities have changed over the years to meet the 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 discussions and to support needed legislation."

In the best sense of the word, the League of Women Voters has always been an activist organization that derives its strength from the energy of 117,000 members in 1,400 state and local Leagues across the nation. Membership was broadened in 1974 to include men and, six years later, more than 3,000 men have joined the League's ranks. There is probably no other national volunteer organization in America whose continuing goals command such a great degree of activity from its members.

As a direct result of this commitment, the League of Women Voters has grown from what it was in 1920—an experiment designed to help 20 million enfranchised women carry out their new responsibilities—to what it is today—a unique, nonpartisan organization that promotes citizen participation at all levels of government and is a recognized force in the making of social policy.

Order from: League of Women Voters of the United States, 1730 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Publication #366. 25¢, 10/\$1.75.