

A Brief & Partial History of the Work of the League of Women Voters

Presented at the Annual Dinner by Julie Nolan & Alison Hayes, April 28, 2016

In the U.S. prior to 1920, men alone had the power, they alone had the purse and they alone had the vote. In 1920, with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, women won the right to vote, and as a result started to share the power and the purse. Illinois was the first State to ratify that amendment.

Perhaps your great-grandmothers, grandmothers or mothers took part in the century-long struggle to gain what we consider today a right. Carrie Chapman Catt, among others, spent her whole life working for women's suffrage and equality. After the vote was won, she and many others who had worked in the suffrage movement, used their time, energy and money to found an organization (the League of Women Voters) which would help educate voters about both issues and candidates, and would promote active participation in government by all citizens, men and women.

In addition to being a source where women could come to get information that was non-partisan and free of their husbands possibly biased information, the League of Women Voters has also consistently worked actively on national issues. Through the decades, many of the reforms and extension of rights that we now take for granted, took a lot of dedicated effort on the part of league members to achieve. For instance, looking through the decades, we see the outstanding work the League has been involved in. Here are some examples of that significant work:

1920's: The League held the first radio broadcast "Meet the Candidates Forum". The League set up classes to train volunteer teachers for citizenship schools.

1930's: The League worked for legislation which was finally passed that instituted civil service and removed Federal jobs from the "spoils system". Also the League worked for the passage of Social Security, the Food Drug Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

1940's: League helped establish the United Nations., the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund, NATO and the Marshall Plan.

1950's: The President of the League spoke before Congress against Sen. Joe McCarthy, on behalf of individual rights. She said "I believe tolerance and respect for the opinions of others are worthily patriotic, but closed minds are apparently unwilling to accept the necessity for dissent within a democracy". Also during the 1950's the League started studying water resources in response to concern about depletion of natural resources.

1960's: The League called for normalization of relations with China, and responded to the civil rights crisis with solid support for equal access to education, housing and employment.

1970's: The League worked for direct popular election of the President, for Campaign Financing Reform, and for the environment – water, air, waste management, land use and energy. The League also worked very hard for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which sadly failed to get the required number of states to ratify before the deadline.

1980's: League worked on the Voting Rights Act of 1982, the Tax Reform Act of 1986 and on developing a League position on Reproductive Choice.

1990's: League adopted positions on gun control, and helped pass the Clean Air Act after a 10 year campaign.

21st Century: League supported abolition of the death penalty, was instrumental in passage of the Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002, worked to renew the Voting Rights Act of 2002, and in 2004 worked on redistricting, civil liberties, election administration reform and ethics and lobbying reform.

In closing, I would like to paraphrase a quote from Carrie Chapman Catt. She said:

**"The vote is the emblem of your equality, women of America; the guarantee of your liberty. The lack of that vote has cost millions of dollars and the lives of thousands of women. Women have sacrificed much in order that they might help get the vote for you. Women have suffered agony of soul which you can never comprehend when they had no vote, and agony to achieve it so that you and your daughters might inherit political freedom. That vote has been costly. Prize it!"*

I believe Ms. Catt would be delighted to know how magnificently the members of the League have furthered her work.

Thanks to Jayne Boeckelman for providing the quote from Ms. Catt.