

THE POWER OF THE VOTE

Ninety –one years ago this August, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified and millions of women got the power of the vote-almost. Because the simple language of that amendment did not, in any way, guarantee women the tools they needed to fully exercise that power, nor did those words sweep away the remaining legal barriers to the full exercise of that power. The Nineteenth Amendment may have been the single most important step to full participation, but it was still just a step. Finishing the fight for the power of the vote was and remains the mission of the League of Women Voters. What does that mission entail?

- Finding and eliminating legal barriers to voting**
- Educating new voters on the political process**
- Registering new voters**
- Providing nonpartisan voter information**
- Using the power of the vote to hold elected officials accountable**

What our founders understood in 1920 is that women could use the power of their vote to achieve a fairer, more humane, peaceful and just world only if women voters understood the issues of the day and actively participated in

government. They understood that if you don't vote, you don't count. They also discovered, early on, the challenge of non partisan political activism.

At the second National Convention, President Maude Wood Park noted that “[i]t was inevitable that in keeping the League as an organization free from any and all forms of partisanship ...we would be misunderstood. Because we succeeded in our determination we were often accused in Democratic states of being a Republican organization and in Republican states of being Democratic. When these accusations were plainly disproved, our opponent frequently came back with the charge that we were intending to form a separate political party for women or else that we were Bolsheviki. There could be no better proof that the League is truly unpartisan than is afforded by these conflicting accusations. It will take time to make our stand clear to a large number of persons who do not themselves think clearly; but the facts are with us and must in time be accepted by all who do not intent to deliberately misrepresent our position.”

In response to these and other challenges, the National Convention was advised “that is it our first duty to develop a high quality of intelligence and self-directing activity in the women voters; that only as that is done shall we get the volume of public opinion among women, and the voters, which are necessary in

order to accomplish our [legislative] object...This conclusion does not in any way involve abandonment of our work for legislation along the lines of women's interests; on the contrary, we believe that this legislative work is a supreme responsibility of the woman voter. But it does imply the adjustment of this for the present to the needs of the organization and the citizenship side of our work, to the end that eventually we may do legislative work that has the honest demand of a genuinely aroused women's opinion back of it."

Today, we face many of these same issues. In a time of political polarization, it is more important than ever to break down the barriers to voting, educate the electorate, and ensure that our elections are run fairly. Because of the central role of elections in our democracy, your national board would like to ask you to join with us in a campaign to ensure that the 2012 election serves the voters. We call this the League's "Power of the Vote campaign," and I'd like to discuss it with you today.

Our history in getting the right to vote is very instructive. That vote was meaningless if women did not register and go to the polls; it was pointless if women registered and voted without understanding the issues. And

understanding the issues and voting only matters if civic engagement continues to the accountability phase.

What was the power of the woman voter? Well, consider the social change that was legislated in the aftermath of giving women the vote. Wage and hour laws, child labor laws, civil service laws might never have been passed otherwise.

To this day, the League's mission is ongoing. Whether native born or naturalized, every new voter faces the same issues that faced millions of women following ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. For generations, the League has registered new voters, educated all voters and actively worked to protect the electoral process.

There have been plenty of bumps along the way – years of work to change state election laws, a great depression, a world war, red scares, racial discrimination, Viet Nam, Watergate, terrorism – all have impacted attitudes toward civic participation or at least the participation of one or another identifiable group.

Over this past year – actually it's a trend that's been building for many years – we've seen increasing levels of blind partisanship; too often, it seems, candidates and elected officials are looking only to the next election and their chance for partisan advantage rather than thinking about what's good for the

country. The arguments in our legislatures focus instead on the most divisive way to make an emotion-laden appeal.

With this extreme partisanship, we've also seen a willingness to say almost anything that justifies a particular point of view. If someone disagrees – charge that they aren't patriotic. Need a fact? Make one up. This is not the way it's supposed to work, but the media no longer serves to check the facts, instead, too often, the media is part of the problem. There's money to be made in controversy and the attack TV or radio show is now pretty common. A vibrant democracy depends on the power of the vote and the power of the vote depends on voters making good decisions based on good information.

And this brings us to the role of citizens. We do live in difficult times. The economy has been about as bad as it could be without a great depression. People are scared and many are angry. But along with our right to complain we have a responsibility to help make the system work. People are yelling at each other, refusing to listen, attacking the motives and the patriotism of their "enemies." Yes, they're being called "enemies" once again. And some are talking about so-called "Second Amendment" solutions and using the Pledge of Allegiance as a cudgel. I have to admit that I was surprised when the League of

Women Voters came under attack as unpatriotic. Really? Aren't we the definition of patriotism?

The 2010 elections were difficult both for the country and for the League. A highly-charged partisan atmosphere combined with huge campaign spending from secret sources threatened to drown out the voices of citizens. None of us anticipate that the League's role in elections as a non-partisan convener of debates and a source of unbiased voter information would come under attack. It was an ugly election season -- and 2012 will likely be worse.

So what are we in the League to do? We could join the noisy game of charge and counter-charge that passes for public debate in the media. We could convene a public meeting to try to start a conversation about why we can't have a conversation. We could scold those who engage in bad behavior. But frankly, we have tried those approaches, without success.

OR, we could roll up our sleeves and get back to the basics that our founders understood so well - that the individual vote is only powerful if it is informed and exercised. In other words, that with great power comes great responsibility.

Lately, we've heard a lot out individual rights and very little about individual responsibility.

How can the League of Women Voters remind Americans of the power of the vote? By committing as an organization, to focus on elections.. Not just in advocacy, not just in education, not just in community service, but with all our tools. Elections are central to the functioning of our democracy. We need all citizens to be registered to vote. We need to have non-partisan, informative debates between candidates. We need to stop unjust ID requirements for voters and we need to reform campaign financing at every level. We need fair, non-partisan redistricting of our legislatures and the Congress.

Elections are what the League of Women Voters does. We know elections. We know how they do run, and we know how they should run. More importantly, our work on elections gives us the opportunity once again to model good behavior. We treat others with respect and civility, even if we disagree. We believe in hearing all sides of the debate. We think that a fact-based, non-partisan approach is the best way for our democracy to operate. We do the work, from voter registration to election reform that every community needs.

As one organization working at three levels, we have the ability to effect change at all three levels of government. But we can only do this by helping each other to re-emphasize our non partisanship and the ways in which our education and advocacy is necessary to and a product of the power of the vote.

What would this organization-wide commitment look like?

First, we must focus on our own non partisanship. In the current climate, we might want to think of this as defensive driving as we navigate the political highway. We need to recognize that we are not the only drivers out there and that many of those out on the political roadways have not chosen a nonpartisan vehicle, are not as well-trained and courteous as we are, and let's face it, there is a lot of political road rage, especially as we approach elections. It is altogether too easy to avoid driving for fear of encountering some of this rage and discourtesy. But if the League gets off the road, who will be there to assist voters? So we should commit ourselves to developing what we might call a non partisan defensive driving course – making use of the expertise within the organization to provide tips and training for our members at all levels of League. No matter how experienced our 'drivers' are, everyone benefits from defensive

driving courses. In fact, we should consider some emergency road side services in each state to support our 'drivers' in the event of accidents!

Second, we must remind ourselves and our communities that the vote is powerful only if every eligible voter is registered and if every registered voter assumes the responsibility of getting informed and voting. In many of our states, that means protecting the election process from unjust ID requirements and in all of our states and in Congress, it means reforming the campaign finance system. Similarly, we need fair, non partisan redistricting of our legislatures and Congress. These are issues that already priorities for League.

Third, we must provide every opportunity for voters to increase the power of their vote by providing non partisan voter information about candidates and issues. We must use the bully-pulpit that our ninety plus years of nonpartisan civic engagement provides to encourage candidates to publicly debate and discuss the issues confronting our communities.

Recognition that everything we do is in some way election related, is not to say that all we do is voter service. One result of the last election is a plethora of proposals, in Washington, to undo many things that the League holds dear and worked hard to achieve. There is nothing in an election focus that is inconsistent

with modeling that key aspect of civic engagement, advocacy. The power of the vote is the power to make sure that our elected officials hear from us on the issue that matter to us.

And we must not forget the international importance of modeling good behavior. We have a lot to teach and a lot to learn from those international visitors hosted by Leagues across the country.

So what I'm asking here today is that you and your League join with us to "Power the Vote" Be active and visible in your community registering voters; work with us on Vote411 to provide candidate information online to the voters; and keep up the good work in protecting the voter.

We are thinking that this initiative includes six elements. Local Leagues will participate in some, state Leagues in others, and LWVUS in still others. But at every level, we'll support each other.

The six elements:

[Note: choose sub-elements

based on audience.]

Voter Registration

Opportunities to register to vote through LWV websites

High school voter registration projects by local Leagues

Other local League voter registration activities, including ones at

naturalization ceremonies for new citizens

Manual outlining project elements from LWVUS

Voter Information

Vote411 to provide polling-place locator, and candidate information from

state and local Leagues

Non-partisan candidate debates by local and state Leagues

Voter Guides by state and local Leagues

LWVUS Board liaison with state Leagues

Election Reform

Advocacy for campaign finance reform at the federal and state levels

Continue the wonderful work by state Leagues in protecting the vote in their

legislatures, with PVAP assistance. Truly good work in battling unnecessary

and expensive voter ID requirements

Redistricting

Emphasis on non-partisan approach

Assistance from LWVUS to 9 selected state Leagues

Information on transparency and other key redistricting issues on the LWVUS website

Information-sharing calls for interested state Leagues participating in the redistricting

Information-sharing calls for interested state Leagues participating in the redistricting process

In outlining these activities, we are not suggesting that the League become a one-issue organization. What we are saying is that everything we do, our whole reason for existing, comes back to one issue –the power of the vote. Making the electoral process work for all voters makes the democratic process work.

Coming off a year-long celebration of our 90th anniversary, nothing could be more appropriate than recommitting ourselves to doing the basic work that our founders did to mobilize and motivate a League of Women Voters to go out and mobilize and motivate our communities to exercise the power of the vote.

On the eve of achieving woman suffrage, Carrie Chapman Catt addressed the Jubilee Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and called for a memorial to the suffrage movement that would not be made of marble 'which only a few would see.. I venture to propose a memorial whose benefits will bless our entire nation and bring happiness to the humblest of our citizens..I propose no marvel; merely the most natural, the most appropriate and the most patriotic memorial that could be suggested – a League of Women Voters to "Finish the Fight;" and to aid in the reconstruction of the Nation."

We are that League, we are those patriots and we can finish the fight and reconstruct this nation!