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*Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy.*

## Our History



The League of Women Voters of Memphis/Shelby County (LWVMSC) was established on April 1, 1920, shortly before the ratification of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. Founded by civic leaders committed to democracy and informed participation, the League quickly became a trusted nonpartisan voice in the Memphis community.

Throughout its early years, the League provided citizenship education programs, public lectures, and voter information initiatives. Despite periods of dissolution due to political and financial pressures, dedicated members reorganized the League multiple times to ensure its continued service to the community.

Reestablished in 1969 and formally organized in 1971, the modern LWVMSC expanded its reach and strengthened its role as a respected civic organization serving all residents of Memphis and Shelby County.

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## Our Mission



The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We work to increase understanding of major public policy issues through education and advocacy.

The League does not support or oppose political parties or candidates.

## What We Do Today



LWVMSC is actively engaged in:

- Protecting voting rights and expanding voter access
  - Providing nonpartisan candidate information through VOTE411.org
  - Advocating for fair and equitable public school funding
  - Promoting environmental protection and sustainability
  - Supporting government transparency and accountability
  - Encouraging civic education and community engagement
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## Leadership Legacy



Since 1920, the League has been led by dedicated presidents and volunteers who have upheld its commitment to nonpartisan civic engagement. From its founding president, Mrs. David B. Puryear, to current leadership, LWVMSC continues to build on more than a century of democratic service.

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## Contact Us



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## ***The History of League of Women Voters of Memphis/Shelby County***

On February 14, 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt created the League of Women Voters of the United States. On **April 1, 1920**, the League of Women Voters of Memphis/Shelby County was established by Mrs. David B. Puryear, wife of a prominent Memphis judge, at a tea at her home at 419 Stonewall Street. Note, the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, was ratified on **August 18, 1920**, when Tennessee became the 36th state to approve it. It was officially certified as part of the U.S. Constitution on **August 26, 1920**. The amendment was passed by Congress on **June 4, 1919**.

Born Jennie McCarver, Mrs. Puryear had been a society editor for the Nashville Tennessean and moved to Memphis with her husband in 1911 where their three daughters, Jennie Burford, Mamie and Mildred were born. According to a newspaper account, Judge and Mrs. Puryear stood arm in arm watching the Governor of Tennessee sign the legislation which ratified the 19th Amendment and, thereby, as the 36th state to do so, made it law. Judge Puryear died on July 1, 1929, but Mrs. Puryear remained in her home on Stonewall Street until she had to retire to a nursing home in Atlanta in the mid 1960's.

Jennie Puryear remained as the first president of the new League only for 8 months. However, she was an active member of the organization for many years, serving several times on the Board of Directors. In 1960, she donated to the Pink Palace Museum a banner of the Memphis Equal Suffrage Association that she had carried in a suffrage parade. Mrs. Puryear also became active in the Tennessee League of Women Voters (LWVTN), including serving as editor of the State Voter.

Many of the original members, such as Mrs. Theresa Dearing, Mrs. Marion Griffin, and Mrs. Sophie G. Friedman remained active until the late 50's and early 60's. Mrs. Friedman's grandson, Dr. Sidney Friedman, was a resident of Memphis until he died in July 2025.

The next president of the LWVMSA was Letitia M. Riley who served until 1926. Miss Riley instituted a series of lectures on citizenship, which were broadcast every Friday night, on WMC, a Memphis radio station. During her administration, Maude Wood Park, the national president, attended the State convention held in Memphis in October 1921. In 1926 State delegates convened again in Memphis. By that time, Miss Riley had also become an active member of the LWVTN serving as chair of the Committee on Uniform Laws for Women.

In 1926 Miss Riley was succeeded by Mrs. John F. Gratz who served as president for at least four years. Mrs. Gratz's son, Dr. John F. Gratz, lived in Memphis and shared some of his mother's

memorabilia. Dr. Gratz retired in California until his death in May 2017. Mrs. Gratz became LWVTN treasurer and in that capacity represented Tennessee at the National Council meeting in Washington in 1927. There she made a strong plea that the 1928 National Convention be held in Memphis in 1928, citing its nearness to Muscle Shoals as one of its advantages.

Few records of the activities of the Memphis League in the next few years were found although there were hints that the organization became increasingly politicized much to the concern of the National League. Even though the Tennessee League was disenfranchised in 1933 because of the lack of funds to pay national dues, the Memphis League continued to exist. Mrs. J. N. Lewis became president in 1936 and under her direction the League engaged in a number of activities such as supporting child labor laws and the abolition of the poll tax. Unfortunately, during Memphis Mayor Crump's administration, the LWVMSC was unable to remain free of partisan political conflicts and was dissolved on May 13, 1938.

Three women, Mrs. Virgil Fulling, Mrs. N.C. Snyder, and Miss Edna Lambert, were reported in the press as being interested in reorganizing the LWV in Memphis. However, no further accounts can be found until 1947 when the League was reactivated with Mrs. John Rust, president, Mrs. J.A. Davis, vice president, Mrs. W.D. Stitt, treasurer, and Miss Erma Murray, secretary. This was a small but very active group, participating in the state as well as local events. Miss Francis Loring, who became vice president in 1948, and Ann Shafer, who was president in 1960 and 1961, were members of the LWVMSC during this time. This, the "second" Memphis League, grew in size and reputation. The organization provided many community services including schools held for poll watchers and launched an active campaign for fluoridation of the water supply. But politics became evident in the activities again and after a bitter fight to remain non-partisan and still attract new members, the Memphis League was dissolved January 31, 1968.

Fortunately, the League was reorganized in 1969 when Frances Byrne moved to Memphis from North Carolina where she had been an active League member. Not finding a local LWV here, she decided to start one herself and with help from the State and National organizations was able to form a provisional League. After a successful membership drive and many activities such as the publication of a Know Your Government booklet, the "third" Memphis League was established on April 2, 1971. This League, now called League of Women Voters of Memphis/Shelby County (LWVMSC), has both men and women as members and a reputation for fair-minded, non-partisan service to the entire community. The current League is involved in issues such as voting rights, protection of the environment, fair and equitable funding for public schools, gun safety, transparency in government, VOTE411 candidate information, and citizenship education. We look forward to many more years of community participation.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, and works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, through education and advocacy. We neither support nor oppose political parties or candidates.

### **Presidents of the League of Women Voters Memphis/Shelby County**



|           |  |
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| 1920      | Mrs. David B. Puryear                      |
| 1921-27   | Miss Lettia Riley                          |
| 1928      | Mrs. John F. Gratz                         |
| 1936-37   | Mrs. J.N. Lewis                            |
| 1943      | Mrs. Virgil Fulling                        |
| 1947-48   | Mrs. John D. (Thelma) Rust                 |
| 1949-50   | Mrs. Robert (Eileen) Meale                 |
| 1951-52   | Mrs. John Osoinsch                         |
| 1953-54   | Mrs. R. Hudson (Irene) Vunk                |
| 1955-56   | Mrs. Charles (Betty) Owen, Jr.             |
| 1957      | Mrs. W.H. Crawford                         |
| 1958-59   | Mrs. Robert C. Wilson                      |
| 1960-61   | Mrs. Robert (Ann) Shafer                   |
| 1962      | Mrs. Thomas Snowden                        |
| 1963      | Mrs. W.J. Tolleson                         |
| 1964-65   | Mrs. James Cherry                          |
| 1970-71   | Mrs. William (Fran) Byrne                  |
| 1972-73   | Mrs. Carl H. (Silvine) Hudson              |
| 1974-75   | Mrs. Wiley (Ethel) Folger                  |
| 1976-77   | Vida Anderson                              |
| 1978-79   | Mary Maduska                               |
| 1980      | Virginia Reynolds                          |
| 1981-82   | Rosemary Hansen                            |
| 1983      | Norma Gandy                                |
| 1984-85   | Katherine Martin                           |
| 1986-87   | Marjorie Raines                            |
| 1988-89   | Theresa Mauer                              |
| 1990-91   | Alicia Tilley                              |
| 1992-93   | Carol Pruitt                               |
| 1994-95   | Winnie Langford                            |
| 1996-97   | Greta Freund                               |
| 1998-99   | Theresa Mauer                              |
| 2000-03   | Pat Stansberry                             |
| 2004-05   | Dee Nollner/Carol Straughn (Co-Presidents) |
| 2006-07   | Dee Nollner                                |
| 2008-15   | Peg Watkins                                |
| 2016-20   | Carol Straughn                             |
| 2021-2022 | Sherry Hewlett                             |
| 2023-2024 | Sherry Hewlett/Nita Black (Co-Presidents)  |
| 2025-2026 | Nita Black                                 |