



Celebrating Our Past, Embracing the Future By Getting Engaged - Speech to LWV-TX State Convention 2016

By: Elisabeth MacNamara, President, League of Women Voters of the United States

The world has changed. Over the past twenty years, we have seen a **dramatic change in the external political environment.** People are increasingly **polarized** along partisan and ideological lines and public **discourse is increasingly rancorous.** At the same time, **the revolution in communication** technology from television to social media has **increased the demand for information** and discussion and **increased the opportunities for people to engage each other across distance and time.**

For the **League of Women Voters**, the **change in the political environment has caused a shift in focus**, particularly over the past 15 years. Since the 2000 Presidential Election, attention has shifted to **election administration as a political tool.** There is nothing new in this. Politicians have tried and often succeeded in manipulating American elections and the American electorate for most of our history. But in the last half of the 20th Century, **elections had become more of an administrative function** and less of a political football. All that **changed in 2000 and the 2010 midterm election turbo-charged that change.**

In League, we are accustomed to pushing the proverbial rock up the political hill on **redistricting reform and campaign finance reform.** These two pillars of special interest control over the outcome of our elections have been with us since the beginning of the Republic and we continue to work for reform. But however partisan and rancorous our politics, at least in our lifetime, **we could all agree that voting was a civic duty and that every eligible voter should be able to cast a ballot.** Indeed throughout my League career, the challenge has been that not enough people take advantage of the right to vote.

All that changed with the 2010 Midterm Election. Early in 2011, state legislators came out of the woodwork with **laws designed to suppress the vote of identifiable groups of eligible voters.** Since 2011, the trend has continued and expanded. From early laws imposing **restrictive voter photo ID** requirements, proponents of limiting access to the polls moved to **proof of citizenship requirements, cutbacks in early voting periods, repeal of same day registration, and attacks on the jewel in the crown of the civil rights era, the Voting Rights Act.**

This was and is indeed a **crisis for our democracy.** In that crisis, the **League of Women Voters has taken a strong lead in protecting and powering the vote.** We were the first to see the danger when ID laws were passed in Georgia and Indiana in 2005. We took the lead then in attacking these laws in court. We came away bruised and battered by the Supreme Court, but we learned important lessons. **When the true onslaught began 4 years ago, we were ready. We came together as an organization** in every state, not just the states where voting was under attack, **to push back and protect the vote.** We drew on our **strength as a national organization to provide expert and financial resources** to the states in the thick of the battle. We came together in other ways, too. **We came together** as we do in every election to **serve voters by providing registration opportunities, candidate forums, and nonpartisan voter**

information. But in 2012, 2013, 2014 and this year in 2015, we performed those traditional voter service functions **in new ways.** **And we are poised to do even more in 2016.**

We focused across the country on **registering voters in underserved communities.** We went to **high schools, community colleges** and we upped our game at **naturalization ceremonies.** We worked together to **provide voter information,** now more urgently needed, **online through Vote411.org** including, more and more, those all-important voter guides.

In statehouses and courthouses across the country **we defeated or delayed nearly every restrictive law in 2012.** Since then, we have **continued to fight for the vote in every venue** and while many of these laws are slowly going into effect, **we stand ready to give voters the information they need to get over the hurdles being placed in their path.** At the same time, we are **proactively pushing for positive reforms of election law.** An increasing number of states are moving to **online voter registration.** We continue to **protect early voting** and work to expand that opportunity in the states. We promote **permanent and portable voter registration** within a state and encourage state and local officials to provide **adequate polling place resources.**

The League of Women Voters is the **living legacy of the fight to get the vote for women. We believe in the power of women to create a more perfect democracy.** The women and men who join is in that belief are committed to making sure that our elections are free, fair and accessible to every eligible voter. For 96 years, the League has worked to eliminate barriers to voting. In the last 10 years, in particular, we have worked **to protect voters in the statehouses** by opposing laws that suppress the vote; **in courthouses to challenge** laws that suppress the vote; and **in our communities to assist** voters to overcome laws and practices that otherwise be a barrier to voting.

When **Carrie Chapman Catt** called for a **League of Women Voters to Finish the Fight,** she did not just mean the fight to get women the vote. **She meant the fight to insure that American democracy was truly a government of the people, by the people and for the people.** She saw in **23 million new women voters a political force motivated to serve the greater good but needing a sound political education** in order to fulfill that promise. She needed an **institutional vehicle** to mobilize and organize women voters for the greater good democracy. **The League of Women Voters is that organization.**

As the **100th anniversary** of suffrage and of the League approaches, LWVUS is organizing around the theme: **Celebrating Our Past, Embracing the Future.**

In many ways, celebrating the past is the easy part. **From now until 2020, history is replete with anniversaries of victories and defeats for the cause of the woman voter.** We all know that ultimately the movement was successful and we know that we are the living legacy of that success. But **100 years ago, that success did not seem so inevitable.** **Carrie Catt served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (The National)** on two separate occasions. The second time she assumed the **leadership was in 1915. One hundred years ago, she evaluated both the external political environment and the internal political environment of the movement** and she saw **crisis and opportunity** on both fronts.

Externally, America was being drawn into the **European War,** a war in which **women were playing an important part.** **Domestically,** history tells us that 100 years ago, **industrialization was causing economic upheaval,** drawing immigrants to our shores and providing **rich industrial interests too much**

power and access to elected officials. At the same time, Carrie Catt saw a **mature suffrage movement** in crisis. While the National remained focused on getting the vote for women, it was divided as to strategy and tactics. Some wanted to focus on the **federal amendment alone**; some saw no way forward on the federal amendment until the **states had granted voting rights**; some had **defected to Alice Paul's** more militant Congressional Union and in the **South, suffrage workers were upset** that the National continued to work for the Federal Amendment. Carrie Catt pronounced that a "serious crisis exists in the suffrage movement. The combination [of these various strategies] **has produced a great muddle from the National can be freed only by careful action.**"

But if she perceived a crisis, **she also saw opportunity.** In Europe, women were proving their worth and continuing to demand the vote and the path to war in America offered women the same chance. While the Congress remained immovable on the issue of a Federal amendment to give women the vote, the woman's movement had achieved so much since 1848, that the time was ripe to push that advantage. Over the 60 plus years of the fight, **women in 1915 were more educated** than ever before, they were entering occupations previously barred to them, especially within communities of faith where they had convinced **major denominations to support the vote; women controlled much more property** and were a greater presence in the workforce and by 1915, **12 states had given women voting rights.**

Carrie Catt saw more than this. She saw a **vast reserve of suffrage supporters** who were not and perhaps never would be members of the National:

"Behind us, in front of us, **everywhere about us are suffragists**, -- millions of them, **but inactive and silent...**There are **thousands of women who have ...been members of our organization** but they have dropped out... Many have taken up other work whose results were more immediate...There are **thousands of other women who have never learned of the earlier struggles of our movement.** They **found doors of opportunity open** to them on every side...almost without exception **they believe in the vote but they feel neither gratitude** to those who opened the doors through which they have entered...**nor any sense of obligation** to open other doors for those who come after...There are still **others** who, timorously looking over their shoulders to see if any listeners be near, will tell us that they hope we will win...**but they are too frightened...to help.** There are **others too occupied with the small things of life to help...**There are **men, too, millions of them waiting to be called.** These men and women are our reserves...**the final struggle needs their numbers and the momentum those numbers will bring."**

In 2015, this should all sound very familiar. To move an **immoveable Congress or to persuade a seemingly unresponsive state legislature, we need numbers!** We may **not be focused on such a singular goal** as getting the vote, but nevertheless, to **finally break out of our own crisis of democracy, we need the momentum of numbers.**

In 2015, the good news is that we are **discovering untapped reserves.** Like those reserves 100 years ago, our reserves **already agree with us on the important issues threatening our democracy** and if we can mobilize these reserves, like the National 100 years ago, we can move those immovable elected bodies. A little more than 100 years ago, **Carrie Catt declared that the Woman's Hour has struck.** The time to

push for final victory had come, “How can it be done?” She said, “By a simple change of mental attitude.”

What was true then is true now. **The League was founded to finish the fight** that is never finished and so final victory is not and will never be in our grasp, but the **current battle can be won, with a simple change in mental attitude.**

The world has changed. Our reserves come from the ranks of the women and men who have been shaped by the changing political environment. **They do not trust institutions; they do not look to institutions to solve community problems.** They have an **unprecedented array of communication tools to employ in creating a new form of civic engagement.** They have **unprecedented access to information.** They are adept and comfortable in the new social media environment and they recognize what we are coming to learn, that this **environment is more than just a convenient way to send messages, this environment is a whole new way to mobilize for action.**

People today put much **greater faith in their friends and families than in institutions, public or private.** They have grown up in a time of lightening advances in digital mass communication; they are fluent in the language and technology of instant interaction with other individuals over time and distance. In this new environment, while we may engage privately in a civil manner, with the anonymity and ubiquity of the internet, we can engage publicly in a manner our parents would not approve.

But for all that engagement and the means of engagement have changed, **people remain fundamentally the same and want fundamentally the same thing from their civic environment.** They want to **belong to a community in which their voice matters.** For those of us who have been League members for many years, our ears perk up at that news. Because of course we believe that we already belong to such a community through the League. **But we also have to acknowledge that as a legacy organization, we are also defined by the institution that we have built over the past 95 years.** Until very recently, an institution was absolutely required in order to organize and communicate over time and distance.

Our challenge for the future is to organize ourselves to be that community people turn to in order to have a voice that matters while at the same time evaluating, reforming and even abandoning those aspects of the current structure that give us the look and the feel of an institution. If that sounds like a contradiction, to a certain extent it is and that is our challenge. There is much about the League that we should be considering in light of the new environment. To begin with, we are structured around geography which is fixed and not flexible and we are structured around a very traditional concept of membership that from the outside looks a lot like belonging or not belonging to our particular community. On the other hand, we can't be a community without some structure.

Which brings me to the notion of **engagement as opposed to recruitment.** We have all talked about recruiting new leaders and members at meetings like this and at meetings all over the country. We use the word recruitment a lot. But if we really think about not just the word but the implications of 'recruitment' it is not hard to see that recruiting puts the needs of the institution first. **We recruit new leaders and new members because the institution needs them to serve institutional purposes, right? That is precisely why the military recruits.**

Engagement is a different concept altogether. **People get engaged. The notion of engagement puts the people first.** When people want to get engaged, they focus on making themselves attractive, available and visible. There is an aspect of mutual benefit in the concept of engagement. **The relationship becomes the focus.** We all know from our own experience that we have to seek out relationships and

that they can't be forced and they can't be rushed. We have to permit relationships to develop and hopefully deepen into ever greater commitment. And we know, from our own experience that it is only at the point that people commit to a relationship that they begin to discuss dividing up the chores.

In the organizational context, that means we have to put our best foot forward all the time. **We have to be visible; we have to be available in the places that people go to seek out relationships with organizations.** This has always been true, it is just that it used to be that organizations were available and visible through word of mouth and **now they are visible and available on line. The internet is a means for people to engage in organizational speed dating if you will.** No one is going to engage in a relationship with an organization whose website looks like nothing more than an online message board or filing cabinet. Who wants to get into a deeper relationship with anyone if on the first date all they get is a lecture? **No relationship will last if one participant communicates a desperate desire to hook up as quickly as possible because they need support in their old age.**

We can laugh at that analogy, but I have seen **too many League websites** that are **message boards and filing cabinets for members** and I have been privy to too many interactions between League members and prospects that focus on the desperate need of the League for new workers and new blood. And we cannot deny that **our belief in the righteousness of our vision of civic participation tends to make us more than just a little pedantic.** We can also be downright exclusive, all protestations about being every persons' organization to the contrary. If you are not a member you often don't count and even if you are a member, if you are not active, you are often not valued.

These are the cultural hold overs from an earlier generation which channeled civic participation through institutions like the League. **The good news, however, is that adapting to the future is truly just a matter of changing our own mental attitude.** We can make ourselves more attractive; we can allow relationships to develop; we can become less exclusive and we can do it while at the same time preserving our grassroots and growing a new, more vibrant grassroots organization. Because at the end of the day that is what this is all about.

This environment is not theoretical. It is not aspirational. **It is real and we are making it work for us at LWVUS.** Since 2010, the League has not just been working to protect the vote through traditional channels. We have also been **working hard to develop new channels to engage in this new environment.** We have **redesigned and repurposed our website** to appeal to an external audience in tune with the issues we care about; we have **created and promoted social media channels** through facebook and twitter and **constantly use that media to engage with a new friends and followers.** We have **expanded the scope and reach of Vote411.org** to adapt our outreach to voters who increasingly expect to get information online; we have **created our own media** buzz through online blogs and new media outlets. Equally important has been our **concerted effort to find and attract new voices for our advocacy, especially in the areas of voting rights and environmental protection.**

As we continuously **evaluate the data** we are collecting in these efforts, we are **learning that people want to engage on issues and they want to engage with the League.** For example, as the result of very deliberate outreach beyond our membership, the League generated **over 30,000 comments to the EPA on its recent rule-making for carbon pollution control. We generated 28,000 of the 32,000 comments that the FEC received** on whether or not to create new rules governing campaign finance. These comments are **carrying the League message directly to decision-makers and they are coming from people who agree with us but want to engage in their own way.**

In the final push for the 19th Amendment, **these people would have been Carrie Catt's reserves**. They would have **signed petitions**; they would have **contacted their representative** on the issue; they would have **distributed a pamphlet** or **brought a friend to hear a speech**. **Today, these reserves engage on line. The implications for the League are enormous and important.**

To truly embrace the future, we, too, need a change in mental attitude. Imagine if our suffrage forbears had had the tools that exist today! I believe **Carrie Chapman Catt would jump for joy**. She would have jumped at the chance to reach thousands of 'friends' and 'followers' with a single message; she would have **gloried in the ability to get those friends and followers to send her message to elected officials just by clicking a link**; she would have **welcomed anyone willing take even one single action in support of the cause.**

We all know that it took **five more years to achieve final victory for women's voting rights**. In Chicago, in the **winter of 1920**, with ratification not yet achieved, but in sight, the National American Woman Suffrage Association held its **last convention**. According to Carrie Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, they **celebrated the path to victory both past and present**. There was a roll call of states which had already ratified; a photo gallery of the work of the movement; and a pageant of victories. But "in spite of such programs, the **convention did not expend all its energies on looking backward** nor its time enjoying the triumph of the moment. It carefully planned for every emergency in the uncompleted ratification campaign, and it **effected the organization of the League of Women Voters...Before the convention ended the phoenix of a new organization with fresh ideas, aims and program had arisen from the old.**"

Since 1920, **the League of Women Voters has reinvented itself, like a phoenix, many times**. As we come together to Make Democracy Work by protecting and powering the vote in these next five years, let us bear that in mind and **with a new mental attitude let us embrace the future, just as we have done in our celebrated past and create our own phoenix to insure that the League of Women Voters is a force for change now and forever.**