

FLAPPERS TO SCRAPPERS

(A Brief History of The League of Women Voters)

By Carol Jones, member of the Sussex County League of Women Voters.

With credit and a huge debt of thanks to Nancy M. Neuman's book,
"The League of Women Voters in Perspective" .

The League of Women Voters of the United State grew out of the Women's Suffrage Movement. It was established in 1920 just six months prior to ratification of the 19th amendment, which gave American women the right to vote. Originally a federation of state organizations named "The National League of Women Voters" it was variously described as a "mighty political experiment," "a semi-political body," "non-partisan and all partisan." 80 years later the LWV is still an anomaly in American politics. It is both non-partisan and political. It educates and advocates. It trains women leaders but cannot support them if they run for public office because it is non-partisan.

The non-partisan part of the League's mission did not come easily. The founders were bitterly divided between those who believed women had a special set of interests requiring a separate voice and those who insisted women should seek equality within existing political parties. Ultimately the issue was settled by compromise: the LWV would not become a women's political party; instead it would mobilize public opinion on reform issues and instruct women how to work more effectively within existing political organizations. Since 1920 political observers have predicted bloc voting by women but the League understood from the outset that women were not monolithic and would not vote as a bloc. But by establishing the dual advantages of 1) grass roots participation and 2) central thinking, planning and leadership, the LWV achieved a surprising unanimity on programs among the membership because of the way in which programs are adopted. "Study Before Action" has always been the standard. The League formulates positions from the grass roots level by means of study programs. Information on a given issue is gathered, evaluated and discussed until a consensus is reached. The issue then becomes an official program of the League and is actively lobbied for at federal, state and local levels. Throughout its history the LWV has brought women's voices to major public policy issues, work that has advanced the status of women in American society.

Radicals have consistently called the League conservative and conservatives have consistently called it radical. That contradiction pretty much confirms the League's view of itself as middle-of-the-road. Always issue oriented, the earliest programs included protecting women factory workers against sweatshop conditions, the promotion of pay based on occupation not gender, maternal health and child welfare (including child labor laws), uniform marriage and divorce laws, election law reform, pure food laws and compulsory education. Some of these battles have been won, some are still being fought and new ones are always being waged.

The LWV barely lasted through the depression and World War II. Survival took precedence over women's issues. But since 1945 it has grown in numbers and influence and expanded its agenda to include campaigns to educate the American public about all manner of civil liberties and constitutional protections and, internationally, the education of women of all nations about democracy and citizen participation. In 1946 the national League adopted a new structure, shifting from a federation to a member-based organization. To emphasize this shift, the name was changed to "The League of Women Voters of the United States" and a formal purpose and policy statement was adopted: PURPOSE: . . . shall be to promote political responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government. POLICY: The League may take action on governmental measures and policies in the public interest. It shall not support or oppose any political party or candidate. And so the League reaffirmed both its intent to educate and advocate political issues, and its non-partisan role.

Because of its advocacy role, the League itself has never had tax deductible status but because of its strong education thrust it needed it. To remedy the problem, the Carrie Chapman Cott Memorial Fund was established to separately fund the educational arm of the League. Ms. Cott was a protegee of Susan B. Anthony and a product of the Suffragette movement. The Cott Fund was later replaced by the LWV Education Fund and while the League and the Fund are closely related, their funds are not. Contributions to the Education Fund are used strictly for education and are tax deductible. The League's advocacy work is financially supported by membership dues which are not tax deductible.

Environmental issues reached the forefront of the LWVUS program in the 1970s -- a natural extension because the League has always stressed citizen participation in environmental decision making, public education and the inter-relatedness of the environment and human needs. And, in 1974, men were admitted to membership in the League. No female chauvinists here! In 1976 the League of Women Voters Education Fund undertook sponsorship of presidential debates. This was a logical step in a long tradition of Voter Service, since the League has held state and local candidates' meetings to educate women in particular and the public in general about candidates and issues from its earliest days.

The 1980s proved to be a period of reaction against achievements in civil rights, women's equality issues and environmental protection laws gained in the 60s and 70s and the League spent the decade staving off threats to those hard won achievements. Its efforts were partially rewarded by the passage of the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988. But that same year the LWV Education Fund voted to withdraw from sponsorship of the presidential debates when the two major political parties established rules so partisan that they undermined the League's goal to educate and posed a threat to its non-partisanship. What has happened to the presidential/vice presidential debates since then might be described as being more like entertainment than enlightenment -- closer to the legacy of P. T. Barnum than to that of Susan B. Anthony.

In 1989 the LWVUS took the lead in a campaign to pass the National Voter Registration Act, known as "Motor Voter," a natural cause for an organization whose heritage is the right to

vote. Grassroots efforts and persistence eventually overcame strong opposition and in May 1993 the bill became law.

The League of Women Voters of Delaware goes back to 1921 with charter members from Wilmington, Dover, Milford, Middletown, Smyrna, DelMar, Georgetown and Newark. Activities of this early group included work toward the abolition of child labor and support of school construction. There is little mention of the Delaware League in the 30s and 40s but we can surmise that, as with the US League, survival took precedence over women's issues during the depression and WWII. The Delaware League reorganized in the 1950s and consolidated into the three county Leagues we have today (New Castle, Kent and Sussex) and from which the State League draws its board of directors.

By 1960 the Delaware State League instituted two programs which have enjoyed continued success to the present: 1) the "Voters' Guide" a statewide candidate informational supplement published previously in general election years throughout the state and soon to be replaced by an internet web page called the "DNet" -- short for Democracy Network and 2) League Day in Dover, an annual event for League members which includes a program and luncheon with state legislators and to which the general public is always invited. Delaware League members support these events in addition to their issue advocacy in the halls of the Delaware State Legislature, city and county council meetings.

In 1976 the Delaware League celebrated the national bicentennial by publishing the "Delaware Government" book which provides an overview of "The First State" and information on our state and local governmental bodies and citizen responsibilities. The book is revised and reprinted on a timely basis (most recently in 1999) and is widely circulated in public offices and libraries throughout the state. The Delaware League also provides information on voting and the government to all newly-naturalized citizens and provides registration and voter information in English and Spanish.

The Sussex County League has continuously worked to increase voter registration and this year is sponsoring voter registration days in September and October in cooperation with Sussex County public libraries. A list of the dates, times and places, will appear in this paper and elsewhere. If you have a neighbor, friend or relative who is new to the State or has moved within the state, encourage them to register. Better still, bring them to the nearest participating library! Currently the Sussex County League of Women Voters is working on their part of the DNet. For those who are on the internet, log into <http://www.dnet.org> for information on the federal, state, and local election races. For those who do not have internet access at home, check in with your local library and check out this new information medium. It's interactive. You'll like it!

Since the 1990s, the League of Women Voters has operated in an environment of public cynicism about government and politics at all levels. At the same time, politically aware citizens need and seek responsive, efficient government.. We're working to meet that need. The League has little money and a lot of programs that we support and lobby for. We may be spread thin

but the “mighty political experiment” continues because, as Winston Churchill so aptly put it, “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all others.” We here in the United States are a fortunate people and to maintain our good fortune we must be vigilant. The League continues to work hard for our mutual, continued success as a nation. Join us anyone? (To join the League of Women Voters contact the State office at 225 King St., Wilmington, DE 19801. Phone/Fax (302) 571-8948. E-mail: lwvde@comcast.net.)

Please note, <http://www.dnet.org> is now <http://vote411.org>.