

President's Report by Elaine Wiant

2018 Convention

The League's 100th anniversary is just around the corner—and we are already beginning our second century of Empowering Voters and Defending Democracy! This year we celebrated 100 years of women voting in Texas Primaries. On March 26, 1918, Governor William Hobby signed the bill giving women the right to vote in the Texas primaries! The leaders of our predecessor the Texas Equal Suffrage Association joined with partner organizations to sponsor a citizenship school to inform the new voters how to register and vote. They then led the effort to register and educate women to vote for the first time in Texas! They registered an estimated 386,000 women to vote in the 17 days allotted for registration for that historic election! This year on March 26 we joined with those partners -- the Texas PTA, the Texas AFL-CIO, the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs, Texas Press Women and the Texas Nurses Association – in a press release and a dedication to working together again to promote voting in Texas. Next year we celebrate 100 years of the League of Women Voters of Texas – and in 2020 100 years of the 19th Amendment and the formation of the national League.

Fifty years ago, in 1969, Ruth Joor, then president of the Texas League, said, “On this fiftieth birthday month of the League of Women Voters of Texas, it would be appropriate, if we could, to peer into a crystal ball to determine what the League will be like on our hundredth birthday.” She continued, “Fifty years ago, on October 19, 1919, five local Leagues – San Antonio, Houston, Galveston, Austin, and El Paso . . . formed the League of Women Voters of Texas. We have come a long way since then, but we still have much more to do. And change is in the wind.”

She closed her speech with “I would like to be around in 2020 to see how the League has progressed. I have no doubt that there will be a League of Women Voters – a greater, more influential, more flexible organization than the League of 1970.”

The League is again experiencing a “change in the wind.” As Chris talked about this morning – we are on a transformation journey. This year is a critical year for the League as we being to move into our 2nd century, and we are well on our way to making Ruth Joor's predictions a reality.

As I pass the gavel to the next board, I want to reflect on the progress we have made in the last few years.

Joor envisioned a League that would be greater, more influential and more flexible. How have we fared? You have heard or will hear from others about much of what we've done, but I don't mind repeating some of the ways we have fulfilled the expectations of Ruth Joor.

Are we greater?

I don't know if we're greater or not, but in many ways, we have made a lot of progress.

- We don't have as many members as we did in 1970, but we do reach thousands – even millions -- more through traditional media, social media and our internet presence. We had nearly 3 million clicks on our website. The number of users on VOTE411 during our primary season was twice what it was in 2016 – and 17 times more than 2014! 4 years ago we had 450 Facebook followers; 1,100 in 2016 and more than 6,400 today!
- We began producing videos for each of the Constitutional Amendments in 2015, and in 2017 our student interns produced excellent videos in both English and Spanish – and they were viewed 55,000 times!
- For the primary election, the interns produced videos to describe the state offices on the ballot. Thank you to Grace Chimene and Aileen McMurrer who worked with the interns on these video projects – and many thanks to all of interns.
- For the first time, this year we covered primary races for Congress, State Senator and State Representative on VOTE411 where we don't have local Leagues. Thank you to Carol Olewin, Nancy Parra, and Tiffany Nasise for making that happen!
- A goal in our 2016 to 2020 strategic plan, was to increase membership by 5% each year. Our membership grew almost 18% since 2016! And we have three new Leagues-at-Large in communities that did not previously have a local League.
- Last summer we had 5 regional trainings around the state – with twice as many in attendance as in 2015. I could feel the excitement as leaders from established and newly forming Leagues gathered to discuss ways to capture the moment following the Women's Marches and begin to discuss the League's "Transformation Journey". Thanks to Peggy Hill and Meg Scott-Johnson, the Services to Local Leagues Committee! We could not have done it without them.

So, are we greater? I think so – and ... so much more to do!

Are we more influential? YES!

We probably had the busiest, most influential, Legislative Session in decades in 2017.

Board members, issue chairs, capitol corps members, staff, and YOU banded together to boldly make our voices heard like never before. You responded to our new and improved (and weekly!) Capitol Action Reports, our first-ever Capitol Action Minute advocacy videos, and more than 150 calls to action. Using new technology, we greatly improved the timeliness of our communications to keep up with the fast pace in the legislature. We didn't shy away from controversial issues like the "bathroom" bill and the onerous restrictions on abortion – and you responded. With our new technology, 920 League advocates communicated with their elected officials 4,733 times!

None of that would have happened without Grace, Issue Chairs, Capitol Corps, Staff, Interns and you.

Last July, the Texas League took really bold action. We joined with NAACP Texas and former League President Ruthann Geer to file a lawsuit to prevent the Texas Secretary of State from disclosing the personal information of Texas voters to the so-called Election “Integrity” Commission. In October, the court issued a Temporary Restraining Order preventing the release of the data. Then, in January, in part due to lawsuits like ours, the Commission was dismantled! We are proud that we took this step to protect Texans’ privacy. Without this fight, Texas would have complied with the misguided request in clear violation of Texas law. Thank you, Ruthann, for volunteering to be our individual plaintiff in this important fight.

In 2016 and again in 2018, LWV TX Board undertook a project to survey and rate election and voter information on every county’s website in Texas. Not only did the 2016 study receive a great deal of attention, but it directly resulted in improvements in the information provided by 2018. Special thanks to Elizabeth Erkel for spearheading this project.

Are we more flexible? I really hope so!

In the 1960s, the League undertook an examination of the Poll tax. A booklet was produced complete with pros and cons. You can’t read it on the screen, but here’s the conclusion: “The present poll tax is so interwoven with the election process that abolition of it as a prerequisite for voting would entail not only a constitutional amendment but almost a complete revision of the [election] Code.” It goes on to suggest three additional studies. I hope that faced with a similar issue today, we would approach it with more flexibility!

One example of our flexibility was our advocacy against the “bathroom” bill. We followed the lead of other Leagues and used our position on Equality of Opportunity – and we advocated – and we won! Amber Briggie is our issue chair and strong advocate for transgender people. Thank you, Amber.

Lobby Days 2017 attracted an overflow crowd at the Capitol – so many Leaguers were registering that we had to stop taking reservations! But decided that we could expand the audience virtually, so League advocates across the state participated on our first-ever Facebook Live event!

Another aspect of our increasing flexibility is seen in the newly formed Leagues-at-Large. We are excited to have Waco, Victoria, and Marshall re-form as Leagues-at-Large and to have entirely new groups formed in Lavaca County, Beaumont, and Fort Bend County. These, and our existing Leagues-at-Large, Rio Grande Valley and Cy-Fair, are doing great League work, and in some cases, leading the way with innovative programs and use of social media. Welcome to the League!

50 years ago the Texas League's Education Fund was formed. And three years ago the board began considering moving all of our operations to a 501(c)(3) organization. Miriam Foshay led the study three years ago and continued to lead the board in navigating the decisions we brought to you today. She also travelled all over the state to many of your local League board meetings to present our findings and recommendations. Thank you, Miriam.

And just last month, the Texas board followed the lead of the national board and voted to waive PMP for students for the next several years. This was in response to the February school shooting in Parkland, Florida and the student activism that followed. Students had a day of action including marches all over Texas – and Leagues participated both in the marches and in registering new voters. We are flexible, nimble and ready to engage with these new young activists.

So, yes, we are greater, more influential, and more flexible – but we have so much more work to do! As I pass the gavel to the next board, I am confident that when you join us in 2020 in San Antonio you will find an even greater, more influential, and more flexible Texas League.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to making these past years a success.