

The League of Women Voters the Decade of the 20s

On February 14, 1920 Carrie Chapman Catt gave a directive to the members. "You need to get into the party not as a 'woman's auxiliary' but to fight for more than a (me too) by convincing the men that you have the ability to open that tightly locked door that has shut you out and lead a successful drive for what you want. You have to convert them."

"The League is going to educate women for active citizenship. Democrats and Republicans must work together, to be nonpartisan. Keep the flag flying for the principles of the Constitution. You need to keep five years ahead of the parties if you are to do your part."

"Do not go to the polls as a mere endorser of a platform that others have written for you in some back office... you should never vote for a ticket until it has been submitted to your intelligence and ratified by your conscience."

Although the 19th Amendment was working its way toward passage, Catt knew there was work to do. In 1920 all but two states were part of the League. Members brought their enthusiasm and inspiration to all parts of the states and remote towns. By 1924 the membership swelled to 100,000. State Leagues were the cornerstone of the League structure. The philosophy of nonpartisanship, consensus on issues, study before action and concerted advocacy were central to the League. The League would not be a "women's party" but would work to educate members on reform issues and how to work within existing political organizations. The 20s were years of political and educational experiments and continuous self questioning.

What were the issues of the 20s? The League program of 1920 contained 69 items under broad headings such as women and children's health and welfare, education, public health and morals. Far too many to address. The League's first major national legislative success was the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act providing federal aid for maternal and child care

programs, the first federally funded social welfare measure in the United States. The act was designed to reduce high maternal and infant death rates in the United States. The League also set up classes to train volunteer teachers for citizenship schools. It organized institutes to study defects in our system of government, initiated "Know Your Town" surveys, candidate questionnaires and meetings, and nationwide get-out-the-vote campaigns activities. In 1928 the League joined with NBC to sponsor "Meet the Candidates," the first national radio broadcast to disseminate voter services information through candidate forum.

After 100 years these issues continue to be important today. What an insightful membership to begin the work of reform and education in the 1920s.

By Marge Massarello, League of Women Voters Oak Park and River Forest

Thank you to...

Nancy M. Neuman, *The league of Women Voters In Perspective 1920-1995*

Kay J. Maxwell, League of Women Voters U.S., *The League of Women Voters Through the Decades*

Barbara Stuhler, *For the Public Record, A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters*

Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970*

The Chicago Daily Tribune, 1920

Chicago Historical Society