

League of Women Voters

A Legacy of Liberal Issues and Causes

By John Gizzi

Summary: *The 95-year-old League of Women Voters isn't quite what it seems. It has long enjoyed an enviable reputation as a nonideological, nonpartisan, good-government group, but contrary to popular belief, it supports Democratic candidates for public office and left-wing policies. The liberal nonprofit favors the pro-choice side of the abortion debate, a clampdown on how much can be donated to political campaigns, and imposing stronger, economy-damaging environmental regulations. (The League was previously profiled in the March 2000 issue of Organization Trends.)*

The League of Women Voters was launched in 1920 to assist a group of Americans who were poised to cast their first-ever votes in the coming national elections. This included the presidential contest between Republican Warren Harding and Democrat James M. Cox.

The newly franchised voters were the women of America.

Established six months before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, the League was primarily concerned with the roughly 20 million new women voters carrying out their new constitutional right and responsibility.



The board of directors of the National League of Women Voters, February 1920.
(source: library.lwv.org)

At its “christening” during the final meeting of the National American Women Suffrage Association in Chicago, League organizers took pains to emphasize that their new organization was “nonpartisan” and would not endorse individual candidates. Its concerns would be public information and influencing the platforms of the major parties. “For almost 90 years,” reads the current mission statement, “the League has

November 2015

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helped millions of women and men become informed participants in government. And it has tackled a diverse range of public policy issues.”

In its early years, the League embraced issues such as so-called social justice and economic reform. After World War II, the League was in the forefront of the campaign for U.S. membership in the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

The League was an early leader in the crusade for civil rights for black Americans. As current League President Elisabeth MacNamara observed, “We have always actively opposed any restrictive laws that would have limited the constitutional rights of Americans.”

In recent years, the League has embraced more esoteric causes. It has been a steady voice for legislation to deal with climate change, establish stricter gun control and environmental legislation, and make the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) the law of the land. Almost since the *Roe v. Wade*



League members pose with their policy “Planks” in the 1920s. (source: library.lwv.org)

Editor: Matthew Vadum

Publisher: Terrence Scanlon

Organization Trends

is published by Capital Research Center, a non-partisan education and research organization, classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

Address:
1513 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036-1480

Phone: (202) 483-6900
Long-Distance: (800) 459-3950

E-mail Address:
mvadum@capitalresearch.org

Web Site:
<http://www.capitalresearch.org>

Organization Trends welcomes letters to the editor.

Reprints are available for \$2.50 pre-paid to Capital Research Center.

ruling by the Supreme Court overturned state restrictions on abortions in 1973, the League has embraced the pro-choice position. Long a champion of tougher federal regulation of campaign finance reform, the organization weighed in as a “friend of the court” in opposition to the *Citizens United* case before the Supreme Court that concluded in the affirmation of the right of independent organizations to spend freely on behalf of candidates and causes.

They’re nonpartisan – NOT!

Most recently, the League has been a vociferous opponent of school vouchers and laws requiring photo identification to vote. In 1999, the League joined in a legal challenge to a Florida law, strongly backed by then-Gov. Jeb Bush (R), that permitted the vouchers.

Perhaps the strongest and most recent evidence that the League has a major flirtation with the Democratic Party is its support letting citizens’ commissions rather than state legislatures draw the boundaries for congressional and state legislative districts.

This concept has increasingly become a *cause célèbre* for Democrats nationwide as Republicans have taken control of both houses of legislatures in more than half the states. A recent Supreme Court case upheld the power of such commissions to handle redistricting, with the League of Women Voters joining in on the side of the plaintiff with a friend-of-the-court brief.

So, are these commissions truly nonpartisan and civic-minded or do they favor the Democrats?

“The evidence speaks for itself,” said Jay O’Callaghan, a former congressional and state legislative staffer from Florida and respected expert on the redistricting process, “Following the 2012 congressional redistricting, the Democrats’ six seat edge in the election that year was largely due to its five seat gain in the nine states with appointed redistricting commissions (which controlled 99 U.S. House seats) and its seven seat gain in the nine states, where the courts intervened and drew the map for 120 U.S. House seats. Even in the states with Democrat legislatures

they only gained three seats. This means that in 2012, for maybe the first time in U.S. history, appointed rather than elected officials decided the boundaries of a majority of (219) U.S. House districts.”

Of course each generation has its own priorities and issues and a case can be made that the League of Women Voters is only responding to the concerns of the electorate of the 21st century. But it can also be argued that the diverse range of issues that it now embraces increasingly bothers and even alienates politically-active women on the political right.

“In accompanying candidates to their forums over the years, I have come to agree with the evaluation that the League of Women Voters embraces left-of-center positions and is hostile to Republicans,” said Lynn Staton, vice chairman of the West Virginia Republican Party. “My reaction to them when they say they are nonpartisan is ‘no way.’”

“I was always happy to speak to the League of Women Voters and appeared at their forums and debates,” said former Rep. Thelma Drake (R-Va.), also a former member of the Virginia House of Delegates, “It is what it is. The League is just like any other group—you can agree with its policy decisions or not. I’m not saying they are good or bad, but their positions are more on the Democratic scale and not normally those of Republican women.”

Republican Andrea LaFontaine—now in her third term in the Michigan House of Representatives and the second-youngest woman ever elected to the Wolverine State legislature—agreed. In her words, “I would not necessarily align myself with their views and have not had much interaction with them.”



Elisabeth MacNamara, current president of the League of Women Voters

Jean Schmidt, former Ohio state legislator and Republican U.S. representative from the Cincinnati area from 2005 to 2013, proudly noted that “I’m a member of the Clermont County League of Women Voters and we take positions on local issues that we feel benefit our community. These includes matters involving our schools or law enforcement, but they are usually things we can agree on.”

But, she added, “there is a major disconnect between the League locally and the national League. I look at their position statement

every year and, no, I don’t agree at all with a lot of the positions they take. “

Schmidt, a strong abortion opponent who marched in the annual March for Life in Washington for many years, did say she found it “interesting that the national league would be so strongly for abortion. In the 19th century, opposing abortion was a means of fighting the mistreatment of women in society. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth

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Katy Stanton, two of the early leaders in the movement for women to vote, were both ardent pro-lifers.”

“I’ve participated in the League-sponsored debates and their forums and I found them to be always a little on the edge—bent to a liberal angle,” recalled conservative Republican Melissa Hart, former state senator and U.S. representative from Western Pennsylvania. “Now, I find them talking about issues even more esoteric—say, how fracking impacts on public health and how shale impacts on public health, which are things that have been debunked by real science.”

Hart said that she used to know “some pretty awesome women in the League, the ones who fought against discrimination against women. Some were Republicans. They never picked on me for being strongly pro-life. But most of them were about my mother’s age and they are gone now. Many of the causes embraced by the League’s leaders of today are, well, kind of goofy.”

It All Started With Carrie

It is impossible to fully understand the League of Women Voters of today without knowing about and understanding its founding mother, Carrie Chapman Catt.

Catt was a law clerk, teacher, superintendent of schools in Mason City, Iowa, and a newspaper reporter. Her marriage to millionaire engineer George Catt gave her the wherewithal to work full-time throughout the country for women’s right to vote. In 1900, she succeeded the legendary Susan B. Anthony as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and would serve two non-consecutive five-year terms at its helm.

An unabashed and charismatic feminist, Catt is considered the premier “mover and shaker” behind America’s voteless women who finally secured the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920—just in time to vote in the 1920 elections (and for Catt to be able to vote for herself for president as the nominee of the small Commonwealth Land Party).



An early version of the League of Women Voters logo.

That same year, Catt presided over the launch of the League of Women Voters. Its goal was to encourage women to use their newfound power at the polls. As current League President Elisabeth MacNamara told this reporter, “Women had fought so long and so hard for the vote that a pent-up advocacy had developed in them. Their attitude was ‘we had the vote and we’re going to use it.’”

Among the fledgling League’s first vice-presidents was the young Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the losing Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 1920, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt would become Catt’s close friend and ally.

The initial vision of the newly-minted League was the registering of women to vote and providing them with education on the issues of the day. Although the League pointedly refused to endorse candidates for office— it

“has never endorsed any candidate for any office in its 95-year history,” says MacNamara—the organization has nonetheless taken positions on many issues.

It is here that the influence and legacy of Catt becomes clear.

“Carrie took a trip around the world around the turn of the century, and it took a lot more than eighty days,” MacNamara explained, “She would always have a very strong international interest and that is why, even when the U.S. embraced isolationism, the League of Women Voters had international programs.”

In August, 1933, a few months after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, Catt led a group of 9,000 non-Jewish women to write a letter of protest to the new chancellor over reports of violence against and laws restricting Jews in Germany. She also led lobbying efforts to make immigration easier for Jewish refugees seeking to come to the United States (for which Catt would later receive an honor known as the American Hebrew medal).

“[Catt] said that ‘nothing impacts on people and children like war,’” said MacNamara, explaining the League founder’s longtime involvement with the anti-war movement. Soon after the League’s founding, Catt helped launch the National Committee on the Cause and Cure of All Wars (NCCCAW).

It is not surprising that after World War II, the League of Women Voters was in the forefront of the campaign to establish the United Nations. Moreover, the group proudly backed the Bretton Woods agreement, which established the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and supported efforts to contain Communism in Europe such as NATO and the Marshall Plan.

On the domestic front, the League was an early enthusiast and activist in the civil rights

movement in the post-war years. It was in those years that one could detect signs that the organization, while above partisanship, was not above ideology.

The League supported President Truman's call for national health insurance and maintains that position to this day. As MacNamara explained, "Public health and public hygiene have always been among our major concerns. Our very first major legislative success was the Sheppard-Towner Act, which set hygiene standards and provided federal aid for maternal and child care programs."

From there, it was an easy leap, then, for the League to champion the creation of Medicare and Medicaid that were signed into law by President Johnson in 1965.

League President Percy Maxim Lee in 1955 testified before Congress against Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R.-Wisc.), who had become a national figure in 1953-54 for investigating Communist infiltration of the U.S. government. Focusing on what the League denounced as McCarthy's "abuse of congressional investigative powers," Lee charged that the "respect for the opinions of others is being jeopardized by men and women whose instincts are worthily patriotic, but whose minds are apparently unwilling to accept the necessity for dissent within a democracy." (By 1955, McCarthy was not a political factor since Democrats had won control of the Senate the previous November. He no longer had the bully pulpit of a committee chairmanship or the accompanying power to subpoena and question witnesses).

Organization

With more than 1,000 local chapters nationwide and 50 state leagues (and even chapters in the Virgin Islands and Hong Kong), a national headquarters in Washington D.C., and a budget of \$4,647,062 for 2014, the League of Women Voters (full name: League of Women Voters of the United States) is a force to be reckoned with. The group is registered as a 501(c)(4) social

welfare organization, which means one of its primary purposes is lobbying. Donations to the League cannot be deducted from income taxes.

The League has 37 employees and 50,352 volunteers working for it. Nancy E. Tate is

what percentage of that membership are minorities, Ceballos said the League does not keep records of its members based on demographics or heritage.

The League's charitable 501(c)(3) nonprofit arm is the League of Women Voters



A recent version of the League of Women Voters logo.

its executive director. From 1994 until she started working at the League in 2000, Tate was Chief Operating Officer of the National Academy of Public Administration. She also worked previously at the Office of Economic Opportunity, a now-defunct agency that was at the center of President Lyndon Johnson's failed War on Poverty. She has a bachelor's degree in political science from Stanford University and a master's in public administration from George Washington University.

Tracking historical LWV membership figures isn't that easy to do.

Membership nationwide has been fluctuating in recent decades but the overall trend is upward. According to newspaper reports, in 1969 it was 156,000, but by 1980 the member base had dipped to 120,500. In 1996 the figure had dropped further to about 90,000 (*Washington Post*, May 7, 1980; *Roanoke Times*, March 18, 1996.)

But current national membership is 200,000 members throughout all 50 states and the District of Columbia, according to League spokeswoman Kelly Ceballos. Asked

Education Fund. On its latest publicly available IRS filing it describes its mission, saying it "encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government and works to increase the understanding of major public policy issues." It discloses that it has no employees but has 50,352 volunteers. It discloses that its budget for the most recent tax year was \$2,981,982.

Despite its moderate pose, the League, its 501(c)(3) arm, and its many affiliates receive significant funding from radical charitable organizations. Radical hedge fund manager George Soros underwrites League activities through his two philanthropies, Open Society Institute (\$1,578,020 since 1999) and Foundation to Promote Open Society (also \$1,578,020 since 1999).

The most generous grant-maker is the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation (\$4,230,788 since 1998). Before he became president, Barack Obama served on the Joyce Foundation's board.

Among some of the most generous grant-makers to the League are: Vanguard

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Charitable Endowment Program (\$1,663,545 since 2004); James Irvine Foundation (\$1,627,500 since 2000); Ford Foundation (\$1,075,000 since 1999); J. Howard Pew Freedom Trust (\$800,000 since 1999); Carnegie Corp. of New York (\$546,000 since 2000); John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (\$475,000 since 2005); and Tides Foundation (\$196,535 since 2005).

“We Do Not Vote” On Positions

Its candidate forums and hosting of debates are staples of American politics in the 20th and 21st centuries. Beginning in 1928, the LWV sponsored a “Meet the Candidates” event that became the first such forum for office-seekers carried on national radio. In 1976, 1980, and 1984, the League sponsored the nationally-televised debates between major party candidates for president. In 1988, however, it ended its role in the debates, with then-League President Nancy Neuman condemning the demands of the candidates’ campaigns.

“When I was in Congress [2000-06], I always went to the League forums, which were usually those sponsored by the Greater Pittsburgh League,” recalled Pennsylvania’s Melissa Hart, adding that the LWV “was not particularly active in rural areas.”

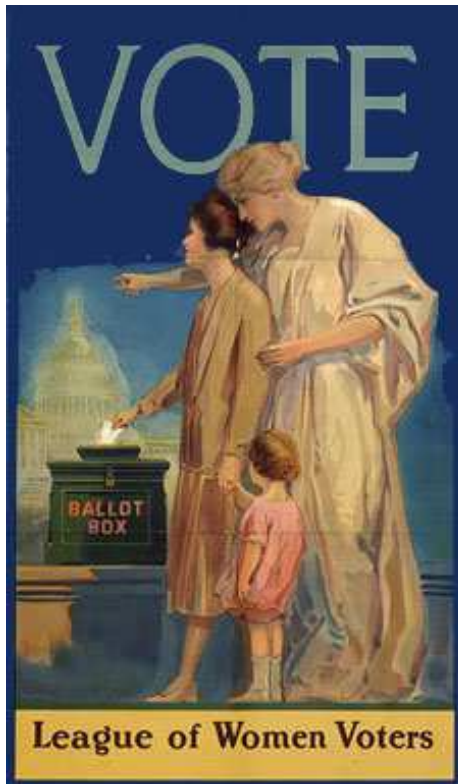
What she clearly remembers a decade later “is that they would ask about things such as climate change, opposing voter ID laws, and new contributor limits as part of campaign finance reform. In other words, they were asking about things that were not even on the agenda with a Republican president and a Republican-controlled Congress at the time. So I was always a little on edge there.”

Responding to Hart’s criticism, LWV President MacNamara told us in a half hour interview: “She needs to take a much closer look at our organization. At our forums, we moderate. It is the audience that does the questioning. All we do is provide voter information in our voter guides. And we state the League’s position.”

As to how the League reaches the positions it takes, MacNamara explained that discussion

of issues and points of views begins at meetings of local and state leagues. Where the League held annual meetings in its embryonic years, she explained, “we decided after the first few years that this is not going to work and so, since 1927, we have held our national convention biannually.”

In the intervening two years between national conventions, state and local League activists



gather materials on current topics, and then begin what the national president calls “our study process.”

According to MacNamara, “this study process is very deliberative and very balanced.

“*We do not vote* [emphasis added]. The positions we take are reached by a consensus process and, from the beginning, we have always taken positions based on consensus.”

As to the criticism that this study-and-consensus process has led to decidedly left-of-center positions in modern times, MacNamara counters that these positions almost always are grounded in the principles

on which the League was founded such as transparency, openness of government, and civic engagement.

Of the group’s recent and very vociferous opposition to the Voter ID laws that have been enacted in more than 30 states and challenged repeatedly in court, onetime DeKalb County (Ga.) prosecutor MacNamara emphasizes that “we have always actively opposed restrictive laws with regard to voting. There is no fail safe for people who have no documents with a picture. We believe that safe and secure voting and open and transparent voting are not, contrary to popular belief, mutually exclusive.”

She added that the League opposition to Voter ID law “is in the tradition of suffrage.”

Of the LWV’s strong opposition to the *Citizens United* decision and call for greater regulation of campaign spending, its president says “we have always spoken against the influence of big money in political campaigns.” In 2002, the League was a vigorous backer of the McCain-Feingold Act which banned soft money from federal campaigns and placed numerous restrictions on use of campaign funding by party committees.

The League’s long-standing commitment to “public health” issues is used by members as justification for the positions it takes on a variety of issues. Its support of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act—“both of which were signed into law by a Republican president named Richard Nixon,” MacNamara reminded us—come under the aegis of health issues for the League as much as its support for Obamacare and expansion of Medicaid. The organization also vigorously opposed extension of the Keystone XL Pipeline.

As to whether its 40-year-plus endorsement of the pro-choice position is also considered a health issue for the LWV, MacNamara did not say. But along with giving its blessings to *Roe v. Wade* the League believes that “reproductive health care,” including abortion, should be included in any future

Briefly Noted

The **Obama** White House has rolled out the red carpet several times for the purported civil rights leaders of **Black Lives Matter**. Recent White House visitor **Phillip Agnew**, head of **Dream Defenders**, which describes itself as “an uprising of communities in struggle, shifting culture through transformational organizing.” It calls for “the destruction of the political and economic systems of Capitalism and Imperialism as well as Patriarchy.” Two-time **Communist Party USA** vice presidential candidate **Angela Davis**, now Distinguished Professor Emerita at the **University of California**, is on its advisory board.

Left-wing financier **George Soros** is under fire in his native Hungary for promoting illegal immigration in that country, which is currently being swamped by mostly Muslim illegal aliens from the Middle East. Prime Minister **Viktor Orban**, who leads the national-conservative party known as the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance, accused an array of Soros-funded groups of “drawing a living from the immigration crisis.” Soros has written in op-eds that “front-line states like Hungary were shirking their asylum obligations” and that each European asylum seeker should be provided “with \$16,800 annually for two years to help cover housing, health care and education costs,” CNBC.com reports. Orban spokesman **János Lázár** quipped that Soros “keeps bombarding the international public with his earth-shattering plans, quite obviously, in the name of true selflessness which he has manifested in so many ways in the countries where his activities have resulted in sovereign default in the past 30 years.”

Ready for jail? Shady class-action lawyer and **Hillary Clinton** 2016 bundler **Mikal Watts** has been indicted in Texas for false statements and identify theft connected to his lawsuit against **BP** for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Watts, who allegedly invented plaintiffs to represent in the lawsuit, raised upwards of \$100,000 for the pro-Clinton super PAC **Ready for Hillary** two years ago and hosted high-dollars fundraisers for President Obama, Washington Free Beacon reports. “My grandmother was a labor union activist,” he previously told WFB, describing himself as “born and raised on grassroots politics.” He also gave \$290,000 to **The American Worker** Super PAC.

Sen. **Ted Cruz** (R-Texas), Rep. **Louie Gohmert** (R-Texas), and other lawmakers are demanding the removal of **Planned Parenthood** founder **Margaret Sanger**’s bust from the National Portrait Gallery’s “Struggle for Justice” exhibit. It is “a complete and utter outrage” to honor Sanger who stood for “deep-rooted racism by advocating birth control as a method for controlling the population of minorities,” Gohmert said. In August, a group of African-American ministers made the same plea to the **Smithsonian**.

After the mass-shooting at **Umpqua Community College** last month, **MoveOn** has launched yet another petition for the further regulation of guns, which author **David B. Kopel** notes are already “the most severely regulated consumer product in the United States—the only product for which FBI permission is required for every single sale.” Attacking the Second Amendment, the petition takes aim at school shootings, stating: “Sandy Hook. Columbine. Red Lake, Minnesota. Essex, Vermont. Lancaster. Aurora. Virginia Tech. How many more innocent victims must die at the hands of an antiquated and oft-misinterpreted amendment? Enough.” The petition ignores the fact that almost all mass shootings in schools take place in gun-free zones.

Looting is a fine way to advance the increasingly violent, racist Black Lives Matter movement, according to an agitator with no advanced degrees who is now teaching college students after the Left gave him a sinecure at **Yale Divinity School**. Twitter star **Deray Mckesson** made this claim during an Oct. 3 lecture on an essay by radical leftist **Willie Osterweil** titled, “In Defense of Looting.”

“Looting for me isn’t violent, it’s an expression of anger,” said Mckesson who won the **PEN New England 2015 Howard Zinn** Freedom to Write Award, named after the late academic who was a member of the Communist Party USA. “The act of looting is political. Another way to dissolve consent. Pressing you to no longer keep me out of this space, by destroying it.” Mckesson is a guest lecturer in the preachy school’s “Transformational Leadership for Church and Society” lecture series, along with Sen. **Chris Coons** (D-Del.) and **United Church of Christ** minister **Nancy Taylor**.