

League of Women Voters *Advocates of Public Discourse or Public Debt?*

by Jared B. Adams

At any given moment on Capitol Hill, odds are that you will be able to find a representative of the League of Women Voters (LWV) lobbying away on behalf of her constituency: America's voting public.

Last month, LWV celebrated the 80th anniversary of its founding. With 130,000 members nationwide, the League achieved prominence as an advocate for citizen education following passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Today it continues to enjoy prestige as one of nation's pre-eminent voters' rights organizations. In the eyes of many, it has a reputation as a neutral "good government" group, and its activities have largely escaped scrutiny.

LWV hosts candidate forums for Congressional candidates and state and local officials, and it is perhaps best known for hosting the televised presidential debates. But in 1988, after much wrangling by the two major parties, LWV announced that it would no longer sponsor the debates. In the words of then-president Nancy Neuman, "The League has no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public."

An analysis of LWV's political agenda suggests the contrary: this apparently benign educational organization is attempting to hoodwink Americans into paying for an expansive and expensive legislative agenda. The organization American taxpayers once viewed as an institutional grandmother nurturing politically curious children is in reality a well-heeled Big Sister.

Behind LWV's facade of impartiality lies an agenda that very often has little to do with the organization's perceived public mission. The group frequently takes positions on issues outside of voting and elections. Among the League's favorite



Associated Press/ AP

Living in the past? Natalie Clark and Lucille Linded (right), president of the Pullman, Washington League of Women Voters, view a display celebrating the chapter's 50th anniversary this year. But other League chapters are disappearing as the organization replaces its original neutral mission with leftist political advocacy.

causes are wealth distribution through progressive taxation, federal funding for abortion, nationalized health care and increased aid to international organizations such as the IMF and the United Nations. On these and many other "voters' issues," LWV has demanded more spending or increased government regulation.

Last November, the League unsuccessfully urged Senators to pass campaign finance reform legislation to outlaw soft money spending for political advocacy. Then it went on to advocate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

The League of Women Voters 1998-

2000 National Program — the group's legislative manifesto — highlights an array of initiatives. All told, if the LWV legislative agenda were passed, Ameri-

March 2000

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cans would dole out an extra \$870 billion annually to the federal government. That's an average tax increase of \$7,189 per taxpayer.

From Social Movement to Special Interest

The once-omnipresent LWV has been in decline for at least the last 20 years. The League's founding members have died, young mothers who swelled membership 20 years ago are mostly career women today, and young adults have failed to answer the organization's call for civic participation. League membership peaked at 157,000 in 1969. Since the 1970s, League events have drawn dwindling numbers, and once-active local chapters have disbanded. In 1974, the League even changed its bylaws to permit male members.

Yet the slide continues. Iowa, where the League was founded in 1920, has seen its membership drop from 2,304 in 1975 to 940 today, and there are 12 fewer chapters in the state. Chapters in Pennsylvania also recently disbanded. The situation seems indicative of a national trend of waning commitment.

Forty years ago, there were LWV chap-

ters in most major communities. In the 1950s, the organization largely consisted of at-home mothers, who held issue forums and candidate debates out of a sense of civic duty. Then came the massive shift

Today, the League's mission is devoted to engineering campaign-finance reform that would give tax-exempt organizations like itself disproportionate influence over national political discourse.

In 1998, LWV — in coalition with other "public interest" groups including the Sierra Club, Common Cause and Joan Claybrook's Public Citizen — spent more than \$12 million pushing campaign finance reforms.

of women to the out-of-home workforce. By the 1970s, few women had much time for League activities; coincidentally, the decade also saw a dramatic rise of special interest groups. The result, according to political science Professor Steffan Schmidt of Iowa State University, was that women with jobs were less inclined to join a group emphasizing good citizenship. They were more attracted to the excitement of specific single issues.

The closure of the gap in rates of voter participation between women and men is another reason why the League has had difficulty recruiting new members. According to Kristi Anderson, professor and chair of Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, "On the brink of the millennium, women usually outnumber men in the electoral process." In fact, statistics kept by the Federal Election Commission show that since 1980 women voters have far outnumbered their male counterparts. As the shift in America's workforce and the success of women's suffrage threaten to make the League obsolete, the organization has been in search of a new mission.

The League has always sought to expand government. In the 1930s, it supported many New Deal programs. It has been a strong supporter of the United Nations, the Equal Rights Amendment and the environmental movement. But its embrace of big-government solutions on matters of public policy increasingly offends the principles of nonpartisanship on which it was founded, and it skews public perception of issues and candidates. Still, the politicized League of the 1990s is very different from the nonpartisan LWV of the 1920s, 1940s and even the 1970s.

Controlling America's Voice

In 1998, the League of Women Voters — in coalition with other "public interest" groups including the Sierra Club, Common Cause and Joan Claybrook's Public Citizen — spent more than \$12 million pushing campaign finance reforms. That's a lot of money for groups that preach against the evils of money in poli-

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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.

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Organization Trends welcomes letters to the editor.

Reprints are available for \$2.50 prepaid to Capital Research Center.

tics. The coalition endorsed taxpayer financing of congressional campaigns and limitations on "soft money" contributions as outlined in the failed 1998 McCain-Feingold legislation.

Interestingly, the McCain bill specifically exempts candidate debates from spending limits. Since the League sponsors candidate debates, it is not especially burdened by the legislation.

But publicly financed campaigns impose a substantial burden on taxpayers. According to a recent analysis by the National Taxpayers Union Foundation (NTUF), hundreds of millions of dollars would be needed to publicly support Congressional candidates. For example, House Resolution 506 of the 105th Congress would have amended the Federal Campaign Act of 1971 to provide up to \$750,000 for qualifying candidates for the House of Representatives. NTUF estimated the resolution, which never came to a vote, would have cost taxpayers \$652 million.

The \$652 million, however, only accounts for two primary winners in each district, i.e. the major party candidates. But in many districts, third party candidates garner enough support to have their name listed on the ballot, thus qualifying them for taxpayer support. It is easy to imagine that publicly financed House campaigns might cost more than \$1 billion. And this figure doesn't account for funding for Senate candidates.

The League of Women Voter's web site argues, "Money has taken over our democracy, producing a crisis of confidence in our political process." Yet recent public opinion polls almost uniformly suggest that campaign finance reform is a low-level concern. Nevertheless, LWV is now shifting focus to "educate" state officials and legislators to secure passage of the kinds of legislation rejected by Congress.

The League's proposals also infringe on the First Amendment rights of citizens. In 1976, the Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo* that the attempt to persuade individuals on public issues is a right as fundamental as suffrage itself. The *Buckley* decision affirmed that no mandatory spending limits could be placed on issue-advocacy campaigns. Yet the

League seeks passage of legislation such as H.R. 506 which would abrogate this principle.

The League seeks more political influence. As former Capital Research Center analyst Robert Pambianco told Gannett News Service in 1997, "By putting caps on the amount of money people can give and imposing government funding, what happens is you basically increase the power of non-profit interest groups."

Recent campaign-finance proposals would restrict or prohibit advertising and

"neutral" even while it supports an agenda of higher taxes and expanded entitlement spending. Last October, the Federal Elections Commission ruled that a debate and information website co-sponsored by LWV was exempt from FEC regulation and campaign finance laws. On February 15, Grassroots.com was inaugurated.

To control the public's perception, some have charged that the League has sometimes tried to prevent open dialogue and restrict access to information, and that it has failed to acknowledge its own status

The League's web site argues, "Money has taken over our democracy, producing a crisis of confidence in our political process." Yet public opinion polls suggest that campaign finance reform is a low-level concern.

informational material that advocate political positions during the campaign season. The muzzling of political voices would force citizens to place their faith in the media and "neutral" educational forums. This helps explain why the League of Women Voters hosts "town hall" meetings and candidate debates. These gatherings allow the League to position itself as

as a special interest. In Colorado, for instance, LWV and Common Cause charged that a Republican-oriented education group violated state campaign finance disclosure laws when it distributed brochures featuring only Republicans. But education groups are exempted from the law, and LWV and Common Cause would not have it apply to them.

League of Women Voters Legislative Priorities for 106th Congress

LEVEL ONE

- Campaign finance reform: restrict "soft money" donations and issue advocacy advertising
- Enhance voter participation and protect the National Voter Registration Act from "weakening" amendments
 - Give full Congressional voting representation for the District of Columbia

LEVEL TWO

- Approve S. 6 and H.R. 358, The Patients' Bill of Rights
- Global warming/clean air: ratify Kyoto Protocol on global warming, approve Clinton Administration proposal for air pollution controls on automobiles
 - pay full \$1.4 billion debt to United Nations

(Source: <http://www.lwv.org/takeaction>)

Organization Trends

Said League of Women Voters member Sally Rudolf to *The Pantagraph* in 1997, "There's no reason to invite someone from the other side to come and tell why our position is bad, because we know our position is right."

There are other examples. The Associated Press reported a LWV effort to confound voters at a 1998 candidate forum in

stream politics.

In principle, LWV recognizes the importance of balanced budgets. However, it rejects institutional mechanisms such as the Balanced Budget Amendment or the Tax Limitation Amendment. Instead, the League argues that deficit reduction should rely primarily on reductions in defense spending and increased revenues through

of lines has led critics to question how the League uses taxpayer dollars.

In 1996, the League of Women Voters Education Fund received \$1.8 million — more than one-third of its total income — from government grants. On paper these taxpayer funds were allocated to support educational seminars on wetlands protection, ozone depletion and particulate matter regulations. One might well ask why LWV was receiving funding for environmental issues education. But in addition, these highly fungible grants probably helped the League to shift funds to its other activities. In 1998, LWV received another \$1.2 million in government grants.

As David Williams and Elizabeth Wright of Citizens Against Government Waste explain, "Many groups use tax dollars to conduct a particular program or to fund their day-to-day operations such as paying rent and payroll or purchasing supplies, while at the same time advocating, lobbying or promoting policies that many Americans would find untenable."

Since its founding, LWV representatives have claimed to be strictly nonpartisan, though not necessarily nonpolitical. As the League web site reveals, the group doesn't make candidate endorsements or support political parties. But the League has become an adjunct to the Democratic Party because it rallies for causes that are central to liberal-left politics. According to *Insight* writer Aimee Howd, "The best example then-president Becky Cain could come up with in 1996 when asked whether LWV had ever 'boosted a GOP policy' was that they backed President Nixon's establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency 30 years ago!"

Rep. David McIntosh (R-IN) argues, "Groups that receive federal money are no longer neutral on such issues as cutting government spending." Nonprofits effectively become mouthpieces for the federal agencies from which they receive funding. In the scramble for government largesse, LWV has been willing to sacrifice its widespread reputation as a "neutral" forum-setter.

Nonprofit Reform

LWV's lobbying serves a multitude of narrow special interests, not the broad common interest. What needs regulation

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Kansas City. Residents charged that the LWV moderator ruled some questions out of order and substituted her own. In Illinois, attendees expressed disappointment over the League's exclusion of proponents of limited taxation at a forum on property tax caps.

How can the League claim to be an honest political broker when it opposes tuition tax credits, the right to carry concealed weapons and efforts to end racial quotas?

Robin Seaborn, who served on the national board of the League of Women Voters from 1990-1994, told *The Weekly Standard*, "Members are not so much educated by the League as they are indoctrinated by it."

Impact on Taxpayers

If the League were capable of successfully lobbying for the items outlined in the *League of Women Voters 1998-2000 National Program*, the economic consequences would be devastating.

The National Taxpayers Union Foundation says the League's agenda of \$870 billion in new annual spending is more than 14 times more costly than the agenda of new proposals by typical Members of the 105th Congress. According to NTUF, no Member of the 105th Congress even came close to advocating as much new spending as LWV. So while it claims to represent America's voting public, the League's policies and programs are out of control, suggesting how dangerously out of touch the group's leaders are with main-

stream politics. Even though IRS data from 1999 shows that the top five percent of income earners paid 52 percent of all income taxes, LWV would increase their share. And it would ignore the recommendations of President Clinton and GOP leaders in Congress who are expected to support increases in defense spending.

Subsidizing the League

LWV is not, as commonly perceived, solely an educational organization. Responding to charges that the League showed a big government bias in 1994 by lobbying for Hillary Clinton's health care legislation, former LWV President Becky Cain retorted, "The League of Women Voters of the United States is not to be confused with the League of Women Voters Education Fund. It was the League U.S. that lobbied for socialized medicine, whereas the Education Fund merely provided disinterested information."

How convenient. It's also convenient that the political advocacy group and the disinterested education group happen to share the same president and 15-member board of trustees. The distinction made by the IRS between the League, a 501(c)(4) lobbying organization, and its 501(c)(3) Education Fund is important. Like many Washington political organizations, the League has created tax-exempt "sister groups" to do nonpolitical research and education work. However, LWV literature is ambiguous on the difference between the "political" LWV and its "non-political" Education Fund. This blurring

and limitation is not private “soft money” spending on advocacy, but federal government grantmaking to advocacy groups. In short, there should be no federal money for advocacy.

Regulators should scrutinize nonprofit lobby organizations with “sister” educational groups that apply for federal grants. Quite often, political 501(c)(4) organizations with 501(c)(3) partners share the same office space, telephone lines, staff and board members. It’s simply time to stop subsidizing the political agendas of such groups. Just as products and services must compete in the marketplace to determine their worth, so too must political groups compete — free from sustaining government cash — so that citizens can fairly evaluate their ideas and policies.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “To compel a man to furnish funds for the propagation of ideas he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical.” Not only has LWV strayed from its mission, but it is also

guilty of behavior that Jefferson condemned.

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**League of Women Voters
of the United States**
(Washington, DC)
IRS Status 501(c)(4)

1998 Income: \$2.83 million

1998 Assets: \$2.0 million

**League of Women Voters
Education Fund**
(Washington, DC)
IRS Status 501(c)(3)

1998 Income: \$4.3 million
(\$1.2 million government grants)

1998 Assets: \$4.4 million

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BrieflyNoted

Nonprofit advocacy groups are intervening in the 2000 elections. The **U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE** is raising \$8 million to support pro-business Congressional candidates. The anti-nuclear **PEACE ACTION** has run ads targeting Republican Senators who voted against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty last fall. The **NATIONAL SMOKERS ALLIANCE** ran ads in South Carolina attacking Sen. John McCain for his efforts in 1998 to raise the price of cigarettes by \$1.10. The **NATIONAL ABORTION AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ACTION LEAGUE** (NARAL) has endorsed Vice President Al Gore, chiding rival Bill Bradley for questioning Gore's commitment to abortion rights. The **NATIONAL RIGHT TO LIFE COMMITTEE** is questioning Sen. John McCain's commitment to banning abortion. Consumer activist **RALPH NADER** has launched his own presidential campaign as a Green Party candidate.

Minnesota's attorney general has sued **MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO**, charging that it exchanged donor's names with the **DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE** and more than 100 nonprofit organizations without the donors' consent. That, says the AG, is a deceptive fundraising practice in violation of state law.

The **HUMANE SOCIETY OF AMERICA** has joined with Salamon Brothers Asset Management to offer an "animal-friendly" mutual fund. Salamon will pick stocks according to the Society's guidelines, and the Society will get 7 cents on every dollar invested. According to the **SOCIAL INVESTMENT FORUM**, about 13 percent of investments in professionally managed funds conform to some form of "socially responsible" guidelines.

Ignoring conservation efforts by American companies, the **SIERRA CLUB** has made its first official product endorsement for a Japanese car. Sierra director Carl Pope called the Honda Insight, a hybrid gas-and-battery vehicle, "the biggest single step the auto industry has taken to solve the problem of global warming."

Environmentalist groups are complaining that the U.S. House in 1999 approved \$831 million in "anti-green" subsidies, the Senate \$733 million. The sponsors of the annual "Green Scissors" report — **FRIENDS OF THE EARTH, TAXPAYERS FOR COMMON SENSE** and the **U.S. PUBLIC INTEREST GROUP** — are upset about funding for fossil fuel research, subsidies for mining and timber, and promotion of farm exports.

The investors' lobby **INTERFAITH CENTER ON CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY** is accusing ExxonMobil of "denial and misinformation on global warming." The group has already successfully pressured Ford Motor Company to join the **PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS**-funded **BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**, and it wants ExxonMobil to do the same.

Sign of the times? The nonprofit **PACIFICA FOUNDATION**, parent of the radical Berkeley, California radio station KPFA, is moving its headquarters to Washington, D.C. Last year Pacifica provoked a near-riot in Berkeley when the multiculturally-oriented board fired the old, white male Marxists who had run the station since the 1960s. Leftists on both sides have been finger-pointing ever since.

HANDGUN CONTROL and its **CENTER TO PREVENT HANDGUN VIOLENCE** have filled two top posts: former Rep. Michael Barnes (D-MD) has been named president, and recent Federal Labor Relations Authority chair Phyllis Segal — also a former Massachusetts deputy attorney general — is the new board chair.