



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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Ninety-One Years Young: The D.C. League of Women Voters, 1920-2011

The charter meeting of the D.C. League was convened in April 1920 at the elegant home of Mrs. Gifford Pinchot. The gathering was not unlike today's League functions – the room was filled with competent, engaged members who were no strangers to civic activism. Early organizers came from the National American Suffrage Association, the Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumers' League. Residents of Virginia and Maryland were welcomed, as their Leagues were not to be formed until 1935 and 1938. Formal recognition came on May 26, 1921 after the National League's first convention.

Often referring to themselves as the Voteless League of Women Voters, members immediately launched plans to fight for DC voting rights. Members were undaunted, even though they suffered the indignities of disenfranchisement at every turn. Those were the days of the three Presidentially-appointed Commissioners and Congressional District Committees who exercised near dictatorial power over citizens of the Nation's Capital. Their struggle -- now ours -- continues today.

From its earliest days, the League was concerned with legislation affecting the lives, welfare, wages and working conditions of women. The fledgling League was instrumental in establishing the Women's Bureau of the Metropolitan Police Department. Surely their interest was partly due to the cruelty and indignities members personally experienced as suffragists arrested by the city police.

From its inception, the League lobbied tirelessly for a professionally managed Board of Public Welfare. Inadequate facilities, untrained staff, and lack of programs for the youth were a national disgrace. Child Labor Laws received serious study and action. A court system for juveniles was virtually non-existent. The League lobbied, cajoled, begged and pleaded for a modern statute. Finally, in 1938, The Juvenile Court Law was passed.

In the early depression years, the League successfully lobbied to end "taxi dance halls" where young girls were recruited to be "hostesses." The League and their allies in the Women's Bureau of MPD agreed that these establishments were "commercialized vice" where young women were grossly exploited.

In the 1930s, the D.C. League joined with National League to work toward the establishment of a professional workforce for the DC government. In 1940, in no small part due to the League's efforts, the Civil Service Act was extended to District employees. It was the first of many governmental reforms the League would advocate.

In the forefront of defending civil liberties, the League firmly opposed loyalty oaths of the 1930s. For the "war effort," the DC League worked for rationing, price controls, day care centers and other war measures. Mrs. Roosevelt became a fast friend of the DC League and often lent her support to our issues. In 1942 the League mounted a monumental study of the DC Public Schools. Higher pay for teachers was a significant goal.

The League's board was not always in step with membership. Washington was a segregated city and so was the League. In the early 40s, the board decided against integration. A dissenting board member took the issue directly to the membership. At neighborhood meetings, she discovered that most favored admitting members of all races. The League was quietly integrated in 1944 and immediately took up the cause of racial equality, working on integrating hospitals, schools and recreation facilities. In 1946, the League Board declared, "Segregation is discrimination."

Consistent with the League's opposition to loyalty oaths, members were quick to deplore the Loyalty-Security Executive Order of 1948 and the ensuing "blacklists."

With Leagues across the United States, LWVDC promoted the idea of the United Nations. League-trained speakers made presentations to over 4,000 citizens in the spring of 1949. International affairs, particularly nuclear non-proliferation and arms control remain a strong interest of the DC League. In the 21st Century, the League continues to support the UN through active participation in the United Nations Association.

As early as 1944 the League recognized that the lack of a comprehensive plan was jeopardizing the city's health. Presciently, the League opined that the government's emphasis on clearing slums rather than on rehabilitation and conservation would have disastrous impact on the urban core. League members foresaw that this misguided policy would lead to new blighted areas as the government displaced families on a large scale with little or no regard to needed social services. Further studies in 1967 and 1972 led to adopting formal positions in favor of a comprehensive planning.

In the 1950s and 60s the LWVDC supported endeavors to build safe and sanitary public housing whenever private contractors were unwilling to build housing for low-income families. More recently, the League studied inclusionary zoning as a means for increasing affordable housing.

The League scored a major victory in 1961 when the 23rd Amendment was ratified, permitting DC citizens to vote for President and Vice President of the United States.

With post-war affluence came the increased use of the automobile. Transportation was the study for 1963. The next year, the League adopted the first in a series of anti-discrimination positions, culminating with the addition of "age" in 1990. In another League victory, President Johnson abolished the three commissioner system and replaced it with an appointed "mayor" and city council. The following year, 1968, a Board of Education was elected. In 1970, Congress authorized the election of a non-voting delegate to represent DC in the House of Representatives. The "Home Rule" act passed in 1973. These incremental steps were indeed victories, but DC Leaguers still press for full representation.

During the 1970s the League continued to study core issues such as education and consumer protection, but added energy conservation, ERA and solid waste management as new issues. Embracing the spirit of gender equality, men were admitted to full membership. In 1975, a position in favor of hand gun control was adopted.

The culmination of a monumental effort was marked in 1980 with the publication of the first edition of *Know the District of Columbia*. This handbook on the history and organization of DC quickly became a standard home and library reference as well as a college textbook. In 1982 League members studied mandatory minimum sentencing and decided that it was not a good idea. Health was again on the agenda, as were the voting process, District finances and the federal payment. A major study of governmental oversight revealed significant areas in need of improvement. In 1998 the League joined a new coalition organization, DC Vote, dedicated to securing full voting representation in Congress. In the 21st century, the League studied charter schools, concluded vouchers were not a good idea, researched the DC Public Library system and, most recently, studied the concept of establishing a community college for DC.

What have Leaguers always done when not studying issues? They prepare voters' guides, raise money, host "brown bags" and of course, demonstrate. Leaguers were seen dressed as tea bags, arrayed in "mourning dress" on election day, and even riding like "Paula" Revere. Throughout our 91-year history, we find recurring themes: voting rights, protection of civil liberties, child welfare, civic education, health, voter services. In 1960, a little blue history of the LWVDC recorded a poignant thought from an "early" president that still rings true today: League emphasis has always been on issues, but lasting friendships have and will continue to be formed among loyal, untiring and dedicated members who study, write, calculate, mail, call, email, testify, cajole, laugh and learn together – "In League." ---Kathryn Ray