

The League of Women Voters Decade of the 60's

The 60's were a time of turmoil, activism and political change. The League of Women Voters of the 1960's confronted many issues including civil rights, equal access to education, employment and housing, the environment and consumer movement, economic opportunity and the "China Puzzle".

The League helped to secure passage of the Water Pollution Control Act Bill of 1961. This included League activities at both the local and state levels. The League did not support pollution tax credits. The League members, through consensus, recognized that companies had the "skills and will to bring their waste discharges into line...without federal assistance... [by] application of free enterprise..."

In 1963 the Presidential Commission passed the Equal Pay Act to combat sex discrimination in employment, an issue the League had lobbied for since 1945. It became part of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Unfortunately, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission refused to take the women's grievances seriously, finding them selfish and trivial. Several members of state women's commissions united in 1966 to form NOW (National Organization for Women) with a goal to bring women into full participation in society as equal partners with men.

At the League's 1964 National Conference, President Lyndon Johnson and First Lady Ladybird Johnson paid an unexpected visit to the convention. (A first for a President) President Johnson declared September 13-20 Women Voters' Week. He also urged the League to support the "War on Poverty." The members at the convention had already adopted a new program on equal opportunity in education, employment and housing as ways to alleviate poverty.

Following the convention a national consensus of its membership supported the government programs promoting equal opportunity for all in education and employment in 1966 and added housing in 1968. The League moved quickly to get involved in programs such as Head Start, Upward Bound projects, daycare, family planning, medical and recreation centers, school lunch and adult education programs. Members were active on community boards and volunteered for local projects.

The League was one of the "most effective supporters" of the Equal Opportunity Act of 1964 and its renewal in 1968.

The League continued to work from the inside through public education but began to feel the pressure for a call to action. Members demonstrated on issues they supported (or opposed) by marching in the streets and formed coalitions with other groups. This gave the League public attention and motivated its members to organize citizens to participate in the civic process.

In 1965 the League took an active role in calling for an immediate study and receiving a near unanimous consensus of its members on the reapportionment question following several state League battles. Equal protection of the law demands “no less than equal state representation for all citizens, of all places, as well as all races.” Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois credited the League with being decisive in “defense of the basic rights of equality of citizenship.” A legal scholar, William Boyd declared that “the League of Women Voters deserve ... more credit... than any other group” for the reapportionment reform.

In 1967 the League issued a pamphlet, “ The China Puzzle: An Introductory Sketch.” In the consensus, in 1969, the League was in overwhelming favor of the United States taking the initiative in “normalizing” relations with China by seeking cultural, trade, diplomatic relations and a Chinese seat at the United Nations.

The League hosted exchanges with women from USSR and OEF institutes for Latin American women.

In 1969, the League initiated a national campaign to petition Congress against the denial of the “citizen’s inalienable rights -- a voice and a vote” in the nation’s capital.

Many of these issues had their beginnings in the 40’s and 50’s and continued in future decades. These women had such an influence on issues and policies that impacted all levels of government in both the United States and at the international level.

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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*

