

To: Catfish Club  
From: League of Women Voters  
Norma Damashek, VP  
Re: History of LWV  
Date: March 29, 2001

The League of Women Voters first saw the light of day about 80 years ago. It was born out of the suffragist movement and undertook a very grand mission: to create new social and government policy that would promote the independence of women. Naturally, this meant enfranchisement through voting rights.

But the mission of this new organization went much further, calling for an attack on "illiteracy, social evils, and industrial ills." In its early decades, the League fought successful battles over so-called "family issues" like federal aid for maternal and child care, collective bargaining, child labor laws, the minimum wage, and compulsory education.

These early struggles taught League members very valuable lessons about the power of citizen education and the art of organizing, and galvanizing citizens to action, so that, by the 1930s, the League was ready and able to take on government corruption and political patronage, waging a lonely but eventually successful battle to establish a merit system for hiring government employees.

In the years that followed, the League promoted environmental as well as social legislation. Through public education and mobilization, it facilitated the creation of the landmark publicly-owned power facility, the Tennessee Valley Authority. The League went on to develop a succession of strong national positions on land use issues, water and air pollution, energy use and conservation, and water management.

It also sank deep roots into the arena of global affairs by advocating for United States membership in the League of Nations and the World Court, the predecessors to the United Nations, setting the course for its ongoing involvement in global peace and government development in emerging democracies.

And drawing on the momentum of the feverish days of the 1960s and '70, the League continues to take on issues of civil and human rights – the problems of poverty and discrimination in jobs and housing, unemployment and underemployment, inequities in public school education, threats to constitutionally guaranteed rights to privacy, and voter rights and empowerment.

The League began as a "mighty political experiment" designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. It encouraged them to use their new power to participate in shaping public policy. From the beginning, it was an activist, grassroots organization whose leaders believed that citizens should play a critical role in advocacy, using the tools of coalition-building and unbiased, non-partisan, and well-researched information.

It's a hard act to follow. But could it be that the achievements of *all* historical figures loom larger than life and cast long, intimidating shadows over what we're trying to achieve today?

Judge for yourselves. These are some of the more recent issues taken on by the League of Women Voters: Campaign finance reform -- *real* reform that includes public financing and diminishing the handicaps faced by first-time candidates for office, especially if they're female or minority candidates. Also, health care reform, meaning full access to care and a Patients' Bill of Rights. And effective gun control through measures like the Brady Bill and the ban on assault weapons. And always, providing a training ground for women office holders.

Here on the local scene, the San Diego League has been directing its attention to many of the city's pressing issues, including living wages and benefits for bus drivers and janitors; preserving the integrity of the city's Civil Service system; housing that's affordable to our lower-income residents; keeping our city parks freely available to the public and protected from encroachment by commercial interests; creating a fully-coordinated "safety net" for the city's children from birth onward; and most recently, setting up a truly independent city ethics commission,

Because the League is not only heard but often heeded by our elected officials, we take our responsibility to the public very seriously. We do our best to stay knowledgeable, impartial, and fair. But we've got a lot more work to do to live up to the League's historical standards, particularly when it comes to forming and joining coalitions with like-minded advocates throughout the city, in working toward social and political progress.

This is particularly important right now, at a time in our city when the rich have gotten richer and the poor are steadily getting poorer, at a time when our new mayor expresses great openness but chooses to gather information from closed advisory groups, at a time when the pressures for growth and increased densities overshadow solutions to problems with housing, education, good jobs, clean water, gas and electric rates, drugs and gangs, and neighborhood amenities faced by the people who have already made this city their home,

This is the year for the League to get down to work on coalition-building, to join others in actively resisting being divided and conquered. We have our work cut out for us and welcome the chance to increase our effectiveness by pooling our skills and resources with all others who share the same vision of a good society.