

Historical Overview of Program Planning

At Council 2007, LWVUS Board Member Elisabeth MacNamara provided a brief historical overview of the League's Program Planning process and Adoption of Program. Her comments, which are below, detailed how these processes have changed over the years.

The League of Women Voters was initially organized as a national organization consisting of four directors who selected one of their own as president. Convention was an annual event and was attended by delegates from each state league and each congressional district. This structure mirrored the organizational structure of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. From the beginning, the LWV struggled to determine its mission. Was it to educate newly enfranchised women on the political process and civic responsibility? Was it to educate women on the substantive issues that they would confront as they became politically active? Or was it a combination of the two? From the first, League leaders discovered that the civic involvement is inseparable from knowledge of the issues. At the 1927 convention, the second president of the LWV, Belle Sherwin, likened the League of Women Voters to "a university without walls...whose members enter to learn and remain to shape the curriculum."

At its first convention in 1920, prior the ratification of the 19th amendment, League delegates adopted a program consisting of 60 items covering everything from social policy legislation to electoral reform and consumer protection. The first president, Maud Wood Parks described it as a "kettle of eels". In the early years, the League struggled with issues of partisanship, membership and money. The nonpartisan policy was adopted early on when it became apparent that the political parties were only giving lip service to involving the new women voters. LWV leaders determined that a nonpartisan, women's organization would be most effective in capitalizing on women's voting strength to effect social change. Nevertheless, by the 1926, attendance at national convention had dropped from 1,000 delegates to just over 300. The bylaws were amended to provide for biennial conventions and council in the intervening year.

The League operated by means of standing committees in the early years. Initially organized around the various social programs that the convention adopted as priorities, the committee structure was continually modified to meet the realities of time and money. Up until the 1950's, program adopted at convention was then prioritized by the National board. Study occurred as the State and Local Leagues gathered the information necessary to take action. In the 1920's the League gathered information on election laws in the various states, looking for discriminatory statutes that needed to be addressed in order to allow women to fully exercise the franchise. The Georgia League was told "we ain't got laws, we got customs." The approach was to motivate women to learn, to help them acquire political knowledge and when that was internalized, women would be motivated to participate politically. The League had many early successes in influencing the federal government. This was the result of the National Board focusing the efforts of the entire organization in a single area for a period of time. Program came from the top down. State and Local Leagues could remain silent on League Program but could not speak out against it.

The League's work on the TVA provides an example of working program in manner unfamiliar to today's LWV. The Board determined that electrification was an important issue for women. Based on that decision, federal efforts to develop hydro-electric power in the Tennessee Valley and other efforts to regulate the production and distribution of electricity were supported by the League. As part of this support, the Local Leagues were given the task of gathering information on how electricity was being provided in their areas and what the impact of electrification was on their communities. That information was passed to the National League and used to support legislation that eventually became the TVA. Similarly, the National League chose to support reforms in party patronage by broadening civil service practices. A slogan, "find the right man for the job, not the right job for the man" was adopted and Local Leagues set out to explore the impact of patronage across the country. The results were not what the League expected. Civil Service was the panacea they had anticipated. Nevertheless, League members informed themselves on an issue of importance to women and to the country.

By the 1950's, the organization had matured. State and Local Leagues were actively pursuing program of their own and had become stronger than the National organization in many ways. The League had evolved into a true grass roots organization. In 1950, the National Board appointed a committee to clean up the National statement of program. The exercise resulted in a program statement that could be printed on one page of the *Voter*. During the 1950's the Education Fund was established and the National *Voter* was first published as a means of improving communication with the individual member. By 1968, the bylaws provided that "Program...shall consist of those governmental issues chosen for concerted study and action." Program categories consisted of the current agenda which were defined as those "governmental issues chosen for sustained attention and concerted action" and continuing responsibilities consisting of "positions on governmental issues to which the League has given sustained attention and on which it may continue to act." Program was adopted at convention in much the fashion that it currently is. Recommendations from State and Local Leagues were made to the LWVUS Board from which the Board proposed a program study and action. Non-recommended items could be brought up at convention by mustering a three-fifths vote for consideration. In 1970, the bylaws were amended to define program as (a) action to protect the right to vote of every citizen and (b) those governmental issues chosen for concerted study and action. Program was adopted as convention. The time for recommending program to the LWVUS Board was shortened from five months to three months and non-recommended program could be brought up for consideration by a majority vote only. Other than to add a procedure for taking concurrence at convention, this is the procedure that is use today.