

LWV and American Elections: *Debates R Us*

By Xandra Kayden, LWVUS Board Member and Education Committee Chair

The 2008 presidential race may well end up with the shortest nominee selection process since the effective demise of the convention after 1976 for the Republicans and 1980 for the Democrats. On the other hand, the 2008 race could have the longest debate season. After candidates have spent all of 2007 seeking their parties' nomination, the major parties' nominees could be determined in the first five weeks of 2008.

To many Americans, "debates R us" – the League of Women Voters. The national League last organized presidential debates in 1988. But, state and local Leagues today continue to organize debates, a League tradition since its founding. In fact, according to a paper by a former LWVUS staff member, Mary Ann Guyol, the League initiated many of the most significant voter educational practices now in use.

The women who fought for suffrage were no less committed, passionate and heroic in pursuing the next steps of assuring an educated electorate. They didn't chain themselves to fences, but the path was hardly smooth. Every League member who has organized a debate knows how difficult it is to referee that particular struggle for power. One early League president is said to have broken five gavels trying to keep order in a debate! Maybe that's how we pounded home our reputation for integrity and fairness.

In 1920, the League's first president, Maud Wood Park, came up with the idea of questionnaires directed to congressional candidates that would reveal where they stood in comparison to each other on the League's priorities. As she put it "Women are accustomed to asking questions when they shop. They want to get the most for their money. Likewise, they want to get the most for their votes."

Leagues across the country came up with questions such as "Are you in favor of an audit of the gold at Fort Knox," and others that addressed issues of child labor, appropriations for the Children's Bureau and legislation affecting maternity and infancy. Then there is: "Mark the answer that most closely reflects your beliefs. Man was created by ___ God, ___ is the product of a [r]evolutionary process having descended from lower forms of life, or ___ undecided."

In this early period, the League was not universally applauded for its efforts. One editorial asked "What business is it of these women how these candidates think *now* on these subjects? These issues arise in the legislature and they will be all more or less party matters and the candidates will then vote in accordance with party theory." Not a far-fetched notion for a time when the parties controlled the

nomination of candidates.

Still, there were other complaints. One candidate called to say that he'd just received the questionnaire and didn't like it at all. "Why, you've asked me to answer questions I've never heard of Why, lady, I venture to say that there isn't a candidate running who could answer these questions. I've asked three officials at city hall and they couldn't answer them You've asked my attitude on the ratification of the Child Labor Amendment. I never heard of such an amendment. You want to know whether I am in favor of reapportionment of funds to take advantage of federal aid for the Sheppard Towner Maternity Act. Now, I don't know what the Sheppard Towner Act is." Other candidates thought voters should just tell them what voters wanted them to do and not go to the trouble of asking what they thought.

The parties complained that it was "mortifying" when people came to the state committee headquarters asking for such information and, when told it could not be furnished, declaring: "Why not? The League of Women Voters has it."

The League called for election law reform; citizen education about elections and campaigning; candidate fairs and debates; permanent registration; accessible polling places; absentee voting; the Australian ballot (secret ballot); and opening up the presidential nominating process through caucuses and primaries. The League opposed poll taxes. It formed coalitions, went to court, and lobbied in city halls and state legislatures, to say nothing of Congress and the executive branch.

Sometimes the League was praised; often members were called interfering women. In its first decade, the League sponsored over 1500 "citizenship schools," often using college or university facilities. One U.S. senator explained how broad-minded he was and, when handed a paper ballot, said "I always take out my pen and I always check carefully the people I vote for." Someone asked him about the pen, noting that the regulations required the use of a little blue pencil in the voting booth. One hopes that person maintained a League-like demeanor while pointing out that the senator's vote never counted. The League has demanded proper behavior by everyone throughout its history. One moderator, for instance, told a highly partisan member of the audience at a debate that she was going to call his mother in the morning....

What is most extraordinary about the impact of the League of Women Voters is the continuity of its mission, the shortness of its history and the extent of its contributions to American elections. We can be proud as we carry forward the work of our predecessors and continue to ensure the integrity of our election process.

Most of these stories come from a draft of Mary Ann Guyol's 1984 paper, "Opening the System: the Impact of the League of Women Voters on Elections." I came across it in the papers of Willie Grace Campbell, former president of the Indiana League, LWV national board member and president for many years of the Overseas Education Fund, who died last year at the age of 90.