

Celebrating Our Past, Embracing the Future- OK State Convention 2015

I am so pleased to be with you today. As your neighbor in Texas, I feel like we are kin folks.

First, I bring you greetings and best wishes from the national board and staff. I have appreciated working with Sheila Swearingen as your state president and am grateful for all that she and you are doing. Sheila, I would like to present you with this Certificate of Appreciation from LWVUS.

The world has changed. Over the past twenty years, we have seen a **dramatic change in the external political environment.** People are increasingly **polarized** along partisan and ideological lines, and public **discourse is increasingly rancorous.** At the same time, **the revolution in communication** technology from television to social media has **increased the demand for information and the opportunities for people to engage each other across distance and time.**

For the **League of Women Voters,** the **change in the political environment has caused a shift in focus** over the past 15 years. **Election administration has become a political tool.** There is nothing new in this. Politicians have tried and often succeeded in manipulating American elections and the American electorate for most of our history. But in the last half of the 20th Century, **elections had become more of an administrative function** and less of a political football. All that **changed in 2000, and subsequent elections have turbo-charged that change.**

In League, we are accustomed to pushing the proverbial rock up the political hill. Two pillars of special interest, redistricting and campaign finance, have influenced the outcome of our elections since the beginning of the Republic. We continue to work for reform; but however partisan and rancorous our politics, at least in our lifetime, **we could all agree that voting was a civic duty and that every eligible voter should be able to cast a ballot.** Indeed, the challenge has been that not enough people take advantage of the right to vote.

All that changed with the 2008 Election. State legislators started coming out of the woodwork with laws written by a legislative exchange group. It was a nationwide effort to suppress the vote of identifiable groups of eligible voters. The trend has continued and expanded. From early laws imposing restrictive voter photo ID requirements, proponents of limiting access to the polls added proof of citizenship requirements, cutbacks in early voting periods, repeal of same day registration, and attacks on the Voting Rights Act.

This was and is indeed a crisis for our democracy. In this crisis, the League of Women Voters has taken a strong lead in protecting and powering the vote. What began in Georgia and Indiana in 2005 with ID laws became a true onslaught about 6 years ago, and the League was ready. We came together as an organization in every state, not just the states where voting was under attack, to push back and protect the vote. We drew on our strength as a national organization to provide expertise and financial resources to the states in the thick of the battle.

As we do in every election, we served voters by providing registration opportunities, candidate forums, and nonpartisan voter information. But since 2012, we performed those traditional voter service functions in new ways.

Across the country, we registered voters in underserved communities in high schools, community colleges and naturalization ceremonies. We provided voter information, now more urgently needed than ever, online through Vote411.org and voter guides.

At the same time, we defeated or delayed nearly every restrictive law in 2012. We have continued to fight for the vote in every venue while we give voters the information they need to get over the hurdles being placed in their path.

We are proactively pushing for positive reforms of election law, such as online voter registration, early voting, permanent and portable voter registration within a state, and adequate polling place resources.

For 95 years the League has been **Making Democracy Work through our nonpartisan voter service and by mobilizing our members and supporters on issues that matter** to our communities, especially those issues that go to **the heart of our democrac: keeping our elections free, fair and accessible to every eligible voter.** Whatever other issues we have taken up, the League has **always stood up for voters against special interest money, partisan gerrymandering, and attempts to limit access to the ballot.** That is part of our DNA.

When **Carrie Chapman Catt** called for a **League of Women Voters to Finish the Fight**, she did not mean just the fight to get women the vote. **She meant the fight to insure that American democracy was truly a government of the people, by the people and for the people.** She saw **23 million new women voters as a political force motivated to serve the greater good but needing a sound political education** in order to fulfill that promise. She needed a way to mobilize and organize women voters for the democracy of the greater good and founded **The League of Women Voters.**

As the **100th anniversary** of suffrage and of the League approaches, LWVUS is organizing around the theme: **Celebrating Our Past, Embracing the Future.**

In many ways, celebrating the past is the easy part. We all know that ultimately the movement was successful and we know that we are the living legacy of that success.

But **100 years ago, that success did not seem so inevitable.** **Carrie Catt** served as **president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (The National)** on two separate occasions. The second time she assumed the **leadership was in 1915.** **One hundred years ago, she evaluated both the external and the internal political environment of the movement,** and she saw **crisis and opportunity** on both fronts.

Externally, America was being drawn into the **European War**, a war in which **women were playing an important part.** **Domestically,** history tells us that 100 years ago, **industrialization was causing economic upheaval,** drawing immigrants to our shores. **Rich**

industrial interests had too much power and access to elected officials. At the same time, Carrie Catt saw a **mature suffrage movement** in crisis, divided in strategy and tactics.

But if she perceived a crisis, **she also saw opportunity.** In Europe, women were proving their worth and demanding the vote, and the path to war in America offered women the same chance. While the Congress remained immovable on the issue of a Federal amendment to give women the vote, the woman's movement had achieved so much in the 67 years since 1848 that the time was ripe to push that advantage.

Women in 1915 were more educated, entering occupations from which they had been previously barred, **controlled much more property** and were a greater presence in the workforce. By 1915, **12 states had given women voting rights.**

Still, Carrie Catt saw more than this. She saw **a vast reserve of suffrage supporters** who were not and perhaps never would be members of the National. She said: "Behind us, in front of us, **everywhere about us are suffragists**, -- millions of them, **but inactive and silent...** There are **thousands of women who have ...been members of our organization** but they have dropped out... Many have taken up other work whose results were more immediate... There are **thousands of other women who have never learned of the earlier struggles of our movement.** They **found doors of opportunity open** to them on every side.... Almost without exception **they believe in the vote but they feel neither gratitude** to those who opened the doors through which they have entered... **nor any sense of obligation** to open other doors for those who come after... There are still **others** who, timorously looking over their shoulders to see if any listeners be near, will tell us that they hope we will win... **but they are too frightened...to help.** There are **others too occupied with the small things of life to help...** There are **men, too, millions of them waiting to be called.** These men and women are our reserves... **the final struggle needs their numbers and the momentum those numbers will bring."**

In 2015, this should all sound very familiar. To move an **immoveable Congress or to persuade a seemingly unresponsive state legislature, we need numbers!** We may **not be**

focused on such a singular goal as getting the vote, but nevertheless, to **finally break out of our own crisis of democracy, we need the momentum of numbers.**

And here is the good news. In 2015, we are **discovering untapped reserves.** Like those reserves 100 years ago, our reserves **already agree with us on the important issues threatening our democracy,** and if we can mobilize these reserves, like the National did 100 years ago, we can move those immovable elected bodies. A little more than 100 years ago, **Carrie Catt declared that the Woman's Hour has struck.** The time to **push for final victory** had come.

“How can it be done?” She said, **“By a simple change of mental attitude.”** What was true then is true now. **The League was founded to finish the fight** that is never finished, and so final victory is always just ahead. But the **current battle can be won, with a simple change in mental attitude.**

The world has changed. Many in our reserves come from the ranks of the women and men who have been **shaped by the changing political environment. They neither trust institutions nor look to institutions to solve community problems.** They have an **unprecedented array of communication tools to use for civic engagement.** They have **unprecedented access to information.** They are adept and comfortable in the new social media environment.

They recognize what we in the League are coming to learn, that this **environment is more than just a convenient way to send messages. This environment is a whole new way to mobilize for action. This environment is not theoretical. It is not aspirational. It is real, and we are making it work for us at LWVUS.** Since 2010, the League has not just been working to protect the vote through traditional channels. We have also been **working hard to develop new channels to engage in this new environment.**

- We have **redesigned and repurposed our website** to appeal to an external audience in tune with the issues we care about.

- We have **created and promoted social media channels** through Facebook and Twitter and **constantly use that media to engage with a new friends and followers.**
- We have **expanded the scope and reach of Vote411.org** to adapt our outreach to voters who increasingly expect to get information online.
- We have **created our own media** buzz through online blogs and new media outlets. Equally important has been our **concerted effort to find and attract new voices for our advocacy, especially in the areas of voting rights and environmental protection.**

Recently, we have **begun to evaluate the data** we are collecting in these efforts. What we are **learning is that people want to engage on issues, and they want to engage with the League.** One example, as the result of very deliberate outreach beyond our membership, the League generated **over 30,000 comments to the EPA on its recent rule-making for carbon pollution control.**

In another example, we generated 28,000 of the 32,000 comments that the Federal Elections Commission received on whether to create new rules governing campaign finance. These comments **carry the League message directly to decision-makers. They come from people who agree with us but want to engage in their own way.**

In the course of evaluating this data, we on the board recently made an amazing discovery after a “quick and dirty” analysis by staff of ways that people interact with the League. We have:

- 50,000 members
- 61,600 donors, of whom only about 10,000 are also members
- 200,000+ online engagers (ask for emails and respond to Action Alerts)

- 63,000 Facebook fans and Twitter followers

Now we know that those numbers include duplications, but conservatively, I would estimate that we have 200,000 to 250,000 individuals who are involved with the League in some way.

Then consider that we had 1.5 million visits to VOTE411.org in 2014. These numbers offer proof that the League is very relevant to the public, that we offer a product that people want—nonpartisan, factual, unbiased information about public policy issues and elections--and that the public values what the League offers.

In the final push for the 19th Amendment, **these people would have been Carrie Catt's reserves.** They would have **signed petitions; contacted their representative** on the issue; **distributed a pamphlet or brought a friend to hear a speech.** Today, **these reserves engage online. The implications for the League are enormous and important.**

Remember Carrie Chapman Catt's challenge in the final push for victory in women's suffrage? She called for a change in mental attitude. **To truly embrace the future, we, too, need a change in mental attitude.** Imagine if our suffrage forbears had had the tools that exist today! They would have jumped at the chance to reach thousands of people with a single message. **They would have welcomed anyone willing take even one single action in support of the cause.**

Remember *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam? We know that people are not joining organizations such as the League, a church, the PTA, or a bowling league like they used to. However, generational studies have suggested that the Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000, may be the next Civic Generation.

They could be natural allies with the League. They may not join, but they might take on a spot job—registering voters, developing questions for the *Voters Guide* or a candidate forum, attending a rally for an environmental issue or a matter related to immigration. Consider holding a meeting in the early evening with box dinners or in a restaurant with a place to meet so people can come right after work.

In addition, think about the people you talk to every day who are most interested in public policy and understand the necessary role of government. You may have asked some of these people to join the League or come to a meeting with you, but they couldn't. Well, the next step is to ask them to support the League financially with a donation. Remember, people depend on the League for information. They trust the League. They want to support the League and might do so with a donation in lieu of membership.

We all know that it took **five more years to achieve final victory for women's voting rights**. In Chicago, in the **winter of 1920**, with ratification not yet achieved, but in sight, the National American Woman Suffrage Association held its **last convention**. They **celebrated the path to victory both past and present**. "The **convention did not expend all its energies on looking backward** nor its time enjoying the triumph of the moment. It carefully planned for every emergency in the uncompleted ratification campaign, and it **effected the organization of the League of Women Voters...Before the convention ended, the phoenix of a new organization with fresh ideas, aims and program had arisen from the old.**"

I want to conclude on a hopeful note. In *The Hightower Lowdown*. Jim Hightower, former Texas Agriculture Commissioner and an unreformed, cynical populist, wrote about several movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, the Climate March in New York City, and #BlackLivesMatter and suggested that we may be at a moment when momentous progressive change might be possible, that something unusual is happening as the cultural winds are changing, in other words--zeitgeist.

So what is this zeitgeist thing? Zeitgeist is defined as the dominant mood or spirit of a particular period of history. Think about the Gay Nineties or the Roaring Twenties. Now how would you define this period of history? Some would tell you that it is a time when individuals are coming together around political issues and causes but without the bureaucracy of an organization. While that sounds somewhat chaotic to me, it tells me that

people are seeking change and organizations like the League must be more nimble and flexible to achieve change.

The dominant theory of history is that it has been determined by the heroics of a few “Great Men.” Zeitgeisters, such as Voltaire and Hegel, believed that changes come about because of the grassroots, who push and gradually alter the public beliefs, finally causing the zeitgeist to shift. The zeitgeisters concluded that history is *us*, produced when the social circumstances of a time lead a critical mass of people in society to change what it accepts as right and wrong. It’s a cultural shift, imperceptible at first, that gains energy, mass and speed, moving society from acceptance of “what is” to a broad public yearning for another way, a “what if” or an alternative “is.”

The cultural winds are changing. We are going through a period of significant change in our nation; that’s probably why we feel so anxious about the future.

LWVUS is working to streamline operations to help local, state, and national League be more effective. It behooves us to work together. Since 1920, **the League of Women Voters has reinvented itself many times**. Remember, change takes time, but you have to start somewhere. As we come together in these next five years to Make Democracy Work by protecting and powering the vote, let us keep those changes in mind and **with a new mental attitude, let us embrace the future, just as we have done in our celebrated past and insure that the League of Women Voters is a force for change now and forever.**