

THE STORY OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS: HISTORY, UNITED STATES LWV, COLORADO LWV, and MONTEZUMA LWV

If we had been born in America two hundred years ago, those of us who are women, white or black, would have had to pay taxes on our property, but would not have been allowed to vote. If we got married, all our property would go to our husband, and we would legally cease to exist. If we were men, we would only be allowed to vote if we were white and owned property. On the other hand, Native women in many tribes especially those in the Iroquois Confederation had equal rights and responsibilities with their men.

Most of this changed by 1920 because of the extraordinary American suffragist movement. Let me clarify that suffrage doesn't mean to suffer. It means the right to vote. In America, people who worked for women's right to vote were called Suffragists, in England they were called Suffragettes.

The movement got off the ground in 1848 when, with only two week's notice, a convention was held about women's rights in the Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote a Declaration of Sentiments based on the Declaration of Independence. The chapel was packed and the Declaration was discussed for two days. The idea of voting rights for women was considered too extreme. However, when Frederick Douglass, the brilliant self-educated ex-slave, spoke up supporting women's suffrage, the whole Declaration was passed. He argued that if black men deserved the vote, all women did as well.

Most of the suffragists were also abolitionists who supported the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, the suffragists put their campaign aside to support freedom for Black slaves. After the war, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution which gave the vote to Black men was hotly debated. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony argued that the vote should be extended to women too. They lost. The Supreme Court ruled against women's suffrage.

It took nearly another half century for women to win the vote. As outlined in Article V of our Constitution, two thirds of the states had to approve a Constitutional Amendment giving suffrage to women. Most of the women who started the suffrage movement had died before 1920 and a new generation of leaders and activists pushed it through.

In 1890 Wyoming became the first state to enfranchise its women in its founding documents. Colorado women became voters in 1893 when their men voted to for their suffrage. Utah and Idaho followed soon after, but the Constitutional amendment stalled for another two decades.

I'd like to highlight two suffragist leaders who used different strategies to win the vote. Carrie Chapman Catt was a teacher and newspaper woman who succeeded Susan B. Anthony as leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, NAWSA. They called her "the General", she was a brilliant organizer. When America entered World War I, she and NAWSA made the decision to support the war in order to gain support for the suffrage movement. This was a smart move because it made the public perceive the suffragists as patriots instead of dangerous radicals.

In contrast, there was a more militant wing of the suffragist movement led by Alice Paul, a legal scholar. She organized a huge, artistic suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. that upstaged Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. The marchers wore white so they would show up better in newspaper photographs. When America entered WWI, Paul's supporters held daily silent vigils outside the White House. They confronted the hypocrisy of the President, saying how could America claim that it was defending democracy when half of its citizens couldn't vote. Paul and some of her colleagues were arrested and then force fed in prison when they went on a protest hunger strike. President Wilson finally gave in and Congress approved the 19th Amendment.

The fight to then win support in two thirds of the states dramatically came down to the legislature of Tennessee. Here American women's suffrage was won by one vote. Harry Burns, the youngest member of the legislature, changed his vote from anti to pro suffrage after receiving a letter from his mother urging him to do so.

On Valentine's Day of 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt founded the League of Women Voters. Many men thought that women were stupid and unqualified to vote. The League was founded to help all voters to understand their government and to make thoughtful decisions with their ballots. For 104 years, the League has never supported nor opposed candidates or political parties.

I need to add that neither America nor the League are without flaws. During the long struggle for the vote, many white suffragists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Alice Paul either ignored or sidelined Black suffragists. Some even argued that women's votes would support white supremacy. Jim Crow laws in the South kept most Black people who lived there from voting until the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Native Americans were given the right to vote in 1924, Chinese American immigrants only got the right to vote in 1943.

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL LWV

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan, non-profit, activist, grassroots organization consisting of over 750 local and state Leagues in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Here are some of the national contributions of the League. President Truman invited the League to consult to the US Delegation to the UN Charter conference. The League was one of the first non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to belong to the UN. It continues to have official observer status at the UN.

Through the years there were two differing factions concerning an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. Alice Paul and her colleagues put the ERA on the agenda in the 1920s but the LWV supported a more gradual approach. However, by 1954, the LWV was foursquare behind the Amendment. Congress passed the ERA in 1972, then 2/3s of the states were needed to ratify it. Three states were missing when the 10-year period to approve it ended in 1982. However, with Virginia now supporting the ERA, 2/3s of the states have now approved it. In 2021, the House of Representatives voted to cancel the 1982 deadline. If the Senate will also approve this extension, the ERA will become law.

The League sponsored the first televised presidential debate in 1960. It was awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Broadcast Journalism. The League sponsored the Presidential debates in 1980 and 1984 with focus on nonpartisan issues and the central goal of informing voters. When candidates demanded more partisan conditions, the LWV withdrew sponsorship of these debates in 1988. However, the League continues to organize and sponsor debates and forums for local and state offices.

The League sponsored passage of the National Voter Registration Act, the “motor voter” bill which permits citizens to register to vote at motor vehicle agencies, by mail, and at social service agencies, and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 which authorized provisional balloting and the Election Assistance Commission was supported by the LWV.

In 2006, the LWV launched VOTE411.org a nonpartisan resource for the voting public. People can find polling places, ballot drop-off locations and candidates’ positions on issues at VOTE411

In the case of Shelby vs. Holder in 2013, the Supreme Court rolled back some voter protections in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 2019 the Court ruled that partisan gerrymandering cannot be solved in federal courts. In response, the LWV started a People-Powered effort in 50 states and DC to create transparent, people powered redistricting process and to eliminate partisan and racial gerrymandering.

On the national level, the League advocates for a more inclusive democracy where all Americans, regardless of gender, sex, race, ability, or party can see themselves represented in our government. The League brings an anti-racist, social justice lens to the issues of expanding voter access, fighting voter suppression, money in politics, redistricting, and safe and fair elections. In addition, the League promotes social and economic justice through the lenses of health care, the environment, immigration reform and the Census.

The national League charters local leagues and provides guidance about governance issues. Additional information is contained in *Impact on Issues, a Guide to Public Policy Positions 2023-2025*. It is available online for \$5.00.

COLORADO LWV

An in-depth examination of the 96-year history of the Colorado League of Women Voters would take days. If you are interested, the LWVCO History Committee has published “A Force for Change: The League of Women Voters of Colorado 1928-2018”. It is 366 pages long and sells for \$5.00.

Briefly, a Senator's wife called Mabel Costigan organized the Women Citizen's League in 1928. It was called that because another group had priority on the name League of Women Voters. The Citizen's League met in the tea room of the YWCA in Denver, dues were \$2. They organized immediately into committees: Finance, Membership, Publicity, Efficiency in Government, Child Welfare, Social Hygiene, Women in Industry, Legal Status of Women, International Cooperation to Prevent War. The first local League was started in Boulder in 1931 followed by one in Greeley.

During the Depression, dues were reduced to \$1. The Colorado League produced its first Ballot Issue Pamphlet in 1936. It cost \$56.17 for 10,000 copies. The League started lobbying the Legislature. Issues included old age pensions, minimum wage, jury service for women, consumer protection, low-cost housing.

During WWII, the Colorado League and then Governor Carr opposed the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in Colorado internment camps. Only by 1944 did Colorado women begin to serve on juries. The Women Citizen's League was renamed the League of Women Voters of Colorado

The League worked on a Freedom Agenda in response to the McCarthy hearings. "Citizens do have a constitutional right to privacy, not to be harassed by government." The US LWV national convention was held in Grand Junction in 1955.

During the 1960s the state league worked on the issues of water resources, free speech, civil rights and air pollution. Pat Schroeder, a League member, was elected to Congress as the first woman representative from Colorado in 1972. Colorado ratified the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, the 13th state to do so. Men were admitted to the League in 1970.

The federal government cut programs for women, children, and minorities in the 1980s. Half of voters were now women who worried their rights were threatened. Colorado LWV lobbied for environmental quality and hired a part time lobbyist. They continued to publish Ballot Issue pamphlets and wrote 3 publications describing how state government works.

By 1995 in the US Congress there were 5 female Senators and 48 Congresswomen. In Colorado 34% of the legislators were women. The League worked to pass campaign finance legislation but was unsuccessful. On Channel 4 in Denver, the League produced a show called “Civics Literacy” which had trivia-style questions about government. The show was popular and ran for months.

Colorado has suffered from budget limitations imposed by the TABOR amendment to the Colorado Constitution. The League has, and continues to work, to challenge these restraints in a state where the population is exploding. Other issues addressed by the LWVCO since 2000 include a position on fracking, water quality, health care, redistricting for both the US Congress and the state Legislature. The COVID epidemic has had a silver lining for the LWVCO. Members from all over this big state can meet regularly over Zoom. There are now 19 Local Leagues in the state.

The Colorado Board of Directors and Staff serve to support and link local leagues within the state and with the policies of the national LWV. A major function of the state league is to read all the bills relevant to the League’s vision that are presented to the Colorado legislature. The League may decide to approve, disapprove, or follow some of these bills. Our paid, half-time lobbyist, Andrea Wilkins leads this effort. If you are interested in some area of legislation, for example: health care, water rights, the environment, taxation, you can get involved with the Legislative Action Committee (LAC) which meets at least monthly.

The Colorado LWV has an amazing website lwvcolorado.org which contains all this information. If you haven’t yet, I recommend that you visit it.

THE MONTEZUMA LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

A group of 5 or 6 people who were concerned about local environmental issues began meeting monthly at a Mexican restaurant in Cortez in the late 1990s. They joined the Colorado League as members-at-large. By 2008, the state League urged them to organize as a local league. Our own Jodi Foran, who had previously written a charter for a local League in Plano, TX, wrote the charter with help from Gerry Cummins who came down from Arapaho County to help. Our League was

chartered January 26, 2008 and the Articles of Incorporation for a Nonprofit Corporation were filed September 18th, 2009.

Since then, the Montezuma League has met nearly every month, presenting programs about issues relevant to our land and local government, has distributed Ballot Issue pamphlets every two years, and has produced dozens of Candidate and Issue Forums. Since 2016, we have had a Leadership Team governing process. During COVID we wrote and published a booklet about the suffrage movement and distributed 600 copies to high schools in Montezuma and La Plata.

In 2023, we wrote another booklet *A Citizen's Guide to Montezuma Local Government*. With grants from the LOR Foundation, 2500 copies were printed and distributed for free within Montezuma County.

Our own Karen Sheek was the President of the LWVCO Board from 2020-2022. She continues to serve as a Board Director responsible for Local League Support. One of the most significant of her many contributions is a publication called *Colorado's Innovative and Stellar Election System*. This is a white paper that was presented at the national LWVUS Convention held in Denver in 2022. It is available at lwvcolorado.org, the state website.

In 1790, George Washington said "the establishment of our new Government is the last great experiment for the promotion of human happiness." Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political philosopher, thought the greatest threat to liberty was apathy leading to tyranny. The League of Women Voters plays a vital part in this great experiment for democratic government. Here at the grassroots, we must actively continue our work.

By Constance Fox

Secretary, Montezuma LWV Leadership Team

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