

Carrie Chapman Catt and the League of Women Voters: Winning Political Power for Women

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THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS has deep roots in the American woman suffrage movement. 90 years ago this year, suffragists created the League just as they were winning passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. That effort was led by Carrie Chapman Catt, and her goal was to keep the momentum and maintain state organizations that suffragists had built. The League of Women Voters was the direct and lasting result – really the culmination – of women’s successful drive for political power in the United States.

Winning the right to vote for women was actually a daunting task, and it gave rise to the first great nonviolent civil rights movement of the 20th century – the woman suffrage movement. To get the vote nationally, suffragists had to win statewide elections where only men could vote. And there was always strong opposition. Suffragists waged 54 of these state campaigns, mostly in the early 20th century.

LEARNING POLITICS

They lost most of them, but over time each state victory brought them closer to their ultimate goal of a new Constitutional amendment that would enfranchise women in every state. They realized that an amendment had no hope of passing

if it didn’t have tangible support in the states.

When suffrage pioneers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton called on Congress in the 1870s to approve a woman suffrage amendment, they were invariably told to “go win more states.” So that’s where suffragists put most of their energy – over the next 50 years – during which calls for a new amendment fell on deaf ears.

During these state drives for equal suffrage, local women gained valuable experience. Many rose to leadership positions and helped shape the national movement. These women created a number of leagues and organizations to advance their cause, and they regularly cooperated with men. Suffrage leaders generally took a nonpartisan stance and they made several attempts to organize new women voters.

Some of these women later became leaders in the League of Women Voters, so their collective history strongly influenced the League’s direction. The foremost example is Carrie Chapman Catt.

CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT

Carrie Lane, as she was born, was a teacher and school superintendent in Iowa. She joined her state suffrage association around 1887 when she was 28 and later wrote:

“I have given my life to the suffrage work . . . I have opened the doors of churches and halls and lighted the kerosene lamps; attended to the babies while the meeting was in progress; made the speech; taken the collection; pronounced the benediction; organized the club or committee and have held all the offices imaginable from club president up and down and sidewise.”

During the 1890s, Catt campaigned in the western states, often in the company of Susan B. Anthony. Catt had her first taste of success as an organizer in Colorado in 1893, when male voters approved equal suffrage at the polls for the very first time. In 1900 she was elected to succeed Susan B. Anthony as head of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Catt led the National Association for four years, putting it on a firmer foundation with better organization and more state participation. She was succeeded by Anna Howard Shaw.

In the following years, Carrie Catt traveled around the world, meeting with women on three continents. In 1912 she was a guest at the Chinese Women’s Rights Convention and she later noted, “You cannot imagine how hard is the struggle for liberty which they have to make.” International travel seasoned the Midwesterner and added a larger context to her work. When

she returned home to lead the effort in New York, she continued to be active as president of the International Woman Suffrage Association, which she founded.

MAUD WOOD PARK

At about the same time Carrie Catt was coming to national prominence, Maud Wood Park was organizing college women. Park went to a suffrage meeting in 1900 and realized that she was the youngest person there. So she and another Radcliffe senior organized the first College Equal Suffrage League in Boston. Over the following decade she traveled widely to organize branches of the new league.

She visited Stanford University around 1910 and told students and recent graduates that they were indebted to early women's rights advocates because their work enabled women to go to college. Park also traveled, as Catt did, to study women's conditions in other countries before returning to help lead the drive for suffrage in Massachusetts.

Like the College Equal Suffrage League, male supporters formed Men's Leagues for Woman Suffrage throughout the country. These Leagues enabled voters to show their support, particularly during state campaigns. There were always male allies, and many men were suffragists. In fact, a majority of American men actually voted to enfranchise women in over a dozen states – a noble record which is unmatched anywhere else in the world, where the matter was generally settled by legislatures.

STATE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

State campaigns were often rousing and hard-fought contests that demanded the most from thousands

of volunteers. Suffragists created colorful posters, spoke in the streets, and talked to workers outside factory gates. They organized great parades and mass rallies during these state-wide drives. They distributed millions of leaflets and campaign buttons, and carried out extensive door to door petition drives. They did everything they could to publicize their cause and win elections. The National Association sent organizers, literature and moral support, but the lack of strong national leadership, with financial resources and clear direction, resulted in more independent grassroots activity at the state level.

One example was the first organization of women voters, the forerunner of our League. The National Council of Women Voters was founded by Western suffrage leader Emma Smith DeVoe in 1911 after Washington became the fifth equal suffrage state. This non-partisan, non-sectarian Council worked to educate new voters, extend equal suffrage in other states, and secure public interest legislation. It grew to include all the equal suffrage states until it was eventually merged with the new League of Women Voters.

The growing number of electoral votes cast by equal suffrage states in the west strengthened the cause in the halls of Congress. With women actually voting in a number of states, there was fertile ground in Washington for a renewed drive for the Constitutional amendment. But it wasn't the main priority for the struggling National Association.

THE SUSAN B. ANTHONY AMENDMENT

It was at this point that Alice Paul volunteered to lead the National Association's Congressional Committee

to refocus attention on the Constitutional amendment. Alice Paul was 28 in 1913, and had worked closely with militant suffragettes in England. The tactics she chose were nonviolent but more aggressive than American suffragists were used to. But she was able to put the demand for the amendment firmly before politicians, the public – and other suffragists.

In December 1915 Carrie Chapman Catt, who was 56, was again elected to lead the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Her talent and experience were sorely needed. State campaigns had stalled and the federal government still dodged responsibility. Suffragists were divided, war was imminent, and the opposition seemed overwhelming. This is where her leadership made a critical difference. After meeting with suffrage leaders across the country, Catt formulated a plan to finally push the federal amendment through Congress. If her plan was rejected, she was prepared to resign.

Catt not only called for harder work in each state for full or partial suffrage, she also finally put the full weight of the National Association behind the drive for the federal amendment. Catt's proposal became known as "The Winning Plan" and its genius was how it offered suffragists in each state a set of customized goals that coordinated with work throughout the country. Catt insisted on the agreement of 36 state suffrage leaders who pledged to keep the plan secret to catch opponents off guard.

This is how Maud Wood Park later remembered the meeting:

"When the full number of signatures had been affixed to the compact and we filed out of the room, I felt like Moses on the mountain top

after the Promised Land had been shown to him and he knew the long years of wandering in the wilderness were soon to end. For the first time I saw our goal as possible of attainment in the near future. But we had to have swift and concerted action from every part of the country. Could we get it?"

THE FRONT DOOR LOBBY

To lead the critical lobbying effort in Washington D.C., Catt turned to this able 44-year-old leader from Massachusetts. But Park was worried that she was "too much a reformer and too little an opportunist" to be a good lobbyist. Nonetheless, for two years she led a quietly effective lobbying effort out of a drafty old Capitol mansion they called Suffrage House.

In April 1917, with Carrie Catt standing behind her, Montana suffrage leader Jeannette Rankin, the nation's first Congresswoman, spoke to supporters from the balcony of Suffrage House just before she was seated. Women came from around the country to celebrate – and to lobby their state representatives under Maud Wood Park's watchful eye.

This final version of suffragists' Congressional Committee became known as The Front Door Lobby, named for its straight forward approach. These women worked through freezing weather, wartime shortages, and the deadly flu epidemic to keep their bill moving through Congress despite the overwhelming physical and emotional demands of World War I.

While they lobbied Congressmen and the President, members of Alice Paul's Woman's Party also lobbied and tried to organize women voters in the west into a new political party aimed at passing the Fed-

eral amendment. In 1917 they also began picketing the White House demanding action. When they were illegally arrested, dozens of women, including Alice Paul, began widely-publicized hunger strikes in prison.

Following Catt's secret plan, mainstream suffragists continued to win more states, particularly New York, which increased support in Congress. They also won partial suffrage in 15 states, which included the right to vote for presidential electors. These victories substantially increased women's political power as the 1920 presidential election approached. Politicians realized that, regardless of what they did, women in 30 states would be able to vote for the next President of the United States.

FINAL PASSAGE

Congress finally approved the 19th Amendment in 1919 and sent it to the states for ratification. Here the combined strength of suffragists, and their organization in the states, made all the difference. By July 1920, the 19th Amendment had won approval by 35 state legislatures, most at Special Sessions. Carrie Catt led the difficult drive to win the final state, Tennessee, going there for a week and staying for two tension-filled months. But with that last narrow victory, the 19th Amendment was ratified and signed into law on August 26, 1920.

Following their victory in Tennessee, suffrage leaders stopped in Washington on their way home to see the signed 19th Amendment. Maud Wood Park later wrote:

"Mrs. Catt's journey to New York the next day was as truly a triumphal procession as anything I ever expect to see. At every station at which the train stopped, deputations of women, many of them smil-

ing through tears, were awaiting with their arms full of flowers for her."

"There is a beautiful picture of her taken just before the procession started when she stood in the car, the flowers in her arms and her face alight with the joy of triumphant home-coming. No one of us who saw her then will ever cease to be thankful for that perfect moment when she must have felt to the full the happiness of a great task completed."

ESTABLISHING THE LEAGUE

After the historic victory, Carrie Chapman Catt turned her attention towards abolishing war, and Maud Wood Park returned to the Capitol as the first head of the new League of Women Voters. Catt had proposed the League at the 1919 convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, hoping to channel the energy of suffragists in the states after the final victory. Maud Wood Park, symbol and head of the new women voters, led the League for the first four years. She met with President Warren Harding in 1921.

With former suffragists filling its ranks, the League immediately began to educate the new women voters. In keeping with its heritage, the League was largely non-partisan, welcomed civic-minded men, and actively represented the public interest. The activist nature of the suffrage movement continued to influence the League's work for years, encouraging public displays and popular presentations as well as careful research and analytical work.

Belle Sherwin, a former suffrage leader from Ohio, was the League's second president. She served for ten years and helped establish the

League's reputation as a serious, accountable, and objective organization. Sherwin described the League as a "university without walls . . . whose members enter to learn and remain to shape the curriculum."

MARGUERITE WELLS

Former Minnesota suffrage leader Marguerite Wells was the League's third president, serving the next ten years, until 1944. Wells' vision of the League called for "a nucleus of people in each community who would carry a continuing responsibility for government." She envisioned that these individuals – today's League members, actually – would offer informed leadership on issues as they arose.

There is a great story, before I end, of Marguerite Wells that speaks to the personal passion behind all this. Like all these other notable women, she wasn't always a "little old lady." As a young girl on the unsettled prairie, she took a precocious interest in government. She once persuaded her father, who was a member of the Territorial legislature, to let her accompany him to the all-male party caucus. Wells dressed as a boy, and went disguised in a slicker with a cap pulled down over her short bobbed hair.

And she was exhilarated by the talk she heard. These were men planning their common future and building their own government. You can imagine her genuine, youthful excitement at being where she felt she belonged. She returned home and wrote an account of it in rhyme, and later became a leader of women in Minnesota and the nation.

Wells' vision of people taking responsibility for government is ex-

actly what our suffrage foremothers did and encouraged others to do. In fact, for many years, the League was the main way women could be active politically beyond voting. It took decades before the major political parties opened up to women and seriously supported women candidates. And when they did, many of those women had come up through the League.

PASSING THE TORCH

90 years ago, suffragists passed the torch to a new generation of women who became a vital force in American politics. 90 years later, their dream is still alive – it continues to inspire and inform us. And in this time of multiple crises, their vision offers a precious source of strength and hope. From its beginning, the League of Women Voters not only channeled the heritage of the suffrage movement into the mainstream, it also trained women to become informed civic leaders at the local, state, and national levels.

Following in the footsteps of suffragists, League members have also helped write women back into history. They held elected representatives accountable for true democracy, and laid the foundation for equal political participation. Because the League successfully encouraged people to take responsibility for self-government, it has, literally, been "making democracy work" for decades.

It is an honor to pay tribute to the League of Women Voters, and to its origins and founders, on this, its 90th birthday. Here's to the continued success of our League and to the further flowering of our precious democracy.

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