



Volume 2020-2021 Issue 8 April/May 2021

CALENDAR

April

Apr 14, 7-8:30pm	Membership Happy Hour
Apr 15, 1:15pm	County/City Speaker Series: <u>Environmental Policy and Challenges</u> with Tom Pelton
Apr 22, 7pm	LWVUS DEI Webinar: <u>Surveys and Demographic Collection</u>
Apr 28, 7:30pm	Book Club - <i>Bagman</i> , by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz
Apr 28, 2:30pm	LWV San Diego event: <u>Confronting Racism, Embracing Diversity</u>
Apr 29, 10am-4:30pm	LWVMD Virtual Day on Capitol Hill: <u>Voting Rights and Voter Protection</u>
Apr 29, 10am	LWVUS Pep Rally for People Powered Fair Maps

May

May 26, 7:30pm	Book Club - <i>His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life</i> by Jonathan Alter
-------------------	--

June

June 5	LWVMD Annual Convention
June 18	LWVBCo Annual Meeting

WHAT'S INSIDE

President's Letter	2
Camille Wheeler: A Life Well Lived.....	3
Committees and Reports	4-8
Book Club	4
City/County Programming.....	4
Member Appreciation Award	4
Affordable Housing.....	5
Membership	6-7
Of Interest	8
Statement Against Hate Crimes	8
Confronting Racism, Embracing Democracy.....	8
Reinventing American Democracy	8
League Events.....	9
LWVMD Virtual Day on Capitol Hill.....	9
Fair Maps Pep Rally.....	9
LWVMD Convention.....	9
LWVBCo Annual Meeting.....	9
Pandemics Test the Power of Women	10-11
Board of Directors.....	12

LWV Baltimore County
Empowering residents
through voter registration,
education, and advocacy

PRESIDENTS' LETTER



Tana Hamilton,
President LWVBCo

It is with great sadness that I write this month's presidents' letter without my Co-President, Camille Wheeler. Her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and passing came too close together to fully process. She has been the voice behind this letter for quite some time, creatively using allusion, historical and literary references. I will miss her thoughtful writing style and her breadth of knowledge. I will also miss her wisdom and guidance in leading this wonderful organization.

Moving forward, Ericka McDonald will be my leadership partner until the membership votes on new board members at the Annual Meeting. She is a new member and the committee chair for membership and recruitment. She's been working to fill open volunteer positions, updating administrative products, and is a driving force in our concerted effort at diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). She has brought with her a passion for justice and a fire for making progress.

COVID-19 has made this year full of digital engagements, with little opportunities for in-person interaction. The increase in people being vaccinated, as well as the confidence that social distancing works, provides an opportunity to gather in-person for our Annual Meeting. Mark your calendar to join us June 18 at the Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills, Maryland. If you're not ready to join us in person, no worries. We will live stream the event as well. Everyone will have the opportunity to join us in the most comfortable format.

League members are advancing issues such as police reform, healthcare access, and informing voters. However, on the national level, there is a threat to our mission of defending democracy. The record turnout of voters for the 2020 presidential election should be cause for celebration of democracy. Instead, baseless claims of voter fraud have spurred a backlash of voter suppression bills across the nation. Thankfully, the majority of Maryland legislators are building on the momentum of record voter turnout by continuing to make early and mail-in voting easier.¹

Meanwhile, the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice reports, "As of March 24, legislators have introduced 361 bills with restrictive provisions in 47 states. That's 108 more than the 253 restrictive bills tallied as of February 19, 2021 — a 43 percent increase in little more than a month."²

The League of Women Voters of the U.S. released a statement in March supporting the national For the People Act, which it called, "the most expansive democracy reform legislation we have seen since the Voting Rights Act." The LWVMD, supported by the LWVBCo, prioritizes redistricting reform to provide a more fair and transparent redistricting process. We cannot allow voter suppression laws and gerrymandering to deny anyone their right to vote.

Maryland elections in 2022 are right around the corner. The primary will be in June, and general elections in November. We need to continue to defend democracy as if our lives depended on it. Every American should have easy access to voting, and the League should be at the forefront of ensuring that happens.

Sincerely,

Tana R Hamilton

Tana Hamilton, President

1 Wood, P. (2021, March 12). Unlike many other states, Maryland's legislature is moving to make it easier to vote early or by mail. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/politics/elections/bs-md-pol-ga-voting-bills-20210312-tidfczoe2bfmxdatvtrbt-w6yk4-story.html>

2 Brennan Center for Justice (2021, April 1). Voting Laws Roundup: March 2021 <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-march-2021>

CAMILLE WHEELER: A LIFE WELL LIVED



Last month, former LWVBCo Co-President, Camille Wheeler, passed away from pancreatic cancer. Camille touched the lives of so many people during her life as a daughter, a wife, a social worker, a professor, and as a board member of several community organizations. Our League chapter benefited greatly from Camille's activism and leadership. During this time of reflection, fellow League Board Members wanted to share their memories of working with this remarkable woman.

"When my predecessor left the position, Camille convinced me to become the Co-President. She told me that this group runs itself because it consists of an amazing group of women who are smart, bright go-getters who get the work done. Because she loved writing and being creative, Camille was often the voice behind our presidents' letter. She was one of us, and we need to take time to grieve this loss. I've lost my Commander in Chief."

Tana Hamilton, Co-President

"If you had a question about anything – housing, government - Camille could tell you all about it. I always appreciated that her comments were so well-thought out."

Neilson Andrews, Treasurer

"I was part of the team who many years ago merged the two League entities into the LWVBCo. It was very involved and very complicated. Camille helped by setting goals and target dates to achieve those goals. Camille then cracked the whip for months so we would get it done on time, which we did."

Betsy Sexton, Board Director and Advocacy Committee Chair

"Camille was one of the smartest, most knowledgeable women I have ever known. I got to know her through voter registration. No matter what we talked about, Camille knew something about it. She shared her knowledge with you in a very low key way; she never made you feel stupid. The depth of her knowledge was amazing."

Barbara Crain, 2nd VP and Voter Services Committee Chair

"I was Camille's Co-President at the League. We were so different; I often stressed about the work getting done, but Camille was so relaxed about it. 'It'll flow, don't worry,' she often said. 'It'll come together.' Camille was so supportive but she also liked to stir things up. She would say crazy things during a meeting or go off on a tangent, but it got people to look at stuff from a different perspective. Camille also knew a lot about many things. During our many drives to meetings, Camille would discuss just about any topic. I don't know how she had the time to learn all these things; she was active on a number of boards as well as serving the League."

Theresa Lawler, Board Director and Jessa Goldberg Endowment Fund Co-Director

"Though I didn't know Camille very well, when I read her obituary in the Baltimore Sun, I wish I had. It was so clear Camille had a love for her friends and a love of gardening. Her essence really bloomed in the article."

Carol Wynne, Board Director
and Health Care Committee Chair

"As a new member of the Board, I only knew Camille briefly and from a distance because of COVID. But I had heard about Camille years earlier when I worked as a staff member for Senator Barbara Mikulski, who referred to Camille as 'Sister Camille'. Senator Mikulski really respected her. I am sorry I never had the opportunity to meet Camille in person."

Phyllis Panopoulos, Board Director
and Transportation Committee Chair

"Camille was a unique treasure. Raised in a wealthy, protected environment but naturally drawn to the plight of others, helping people became her life's work. She shaped her career in child public welfare, fighting and advocating for the rights of children. I met Camille when she was the Director of Baltimore County's Department of Social Services. As the director, Camille always had an open door and would engage in long conversations. She challenged me professionally and would drop bombs just to be provocative, but she helped make me a better social worker. Camille was a close, personal friend and was up for so many different activities – biking, horseback riding, dining at the great restaurants in Baltimore. She will always live on in my head. How am I going to know how to think about things if I can't talk to Camille? Camille was grateful to have so many friendships and to be so loved by others, and I am grateful that she was in my life."

Judith Schagrin, Secretary



COMMITTEES AND REPORTS

BOOK CLUB

There is plenty of room to join book club since now all meetings are virtual. Please contact Betsy Sexton, esexton2009@lwvbaltimorecounty.org for the link and time.

- Wednesday, April 28 - *Bagman* by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz
- Wednesday, May 26 - *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life* by Jonathan Alter

- Betsy Sexton, Book Club Chair

COUNTY/CITY PROGRAMMING

The Leagues of Women Voters of Baltimore City and County invite you to our online event:

Jump Starting the Chesapeake Bay Cleanup Thursday, April 15 at 1:15pm



Tom Pelton, Director,
Environmental Integrity
Project

Learn how the Biden Administration can fix the Chesapeake Bay cleanup effort and boost other environmental efforts around the U.S. Tom Pelton will lay out a politically challenging—perhaps radical—but necessary plan for the new administration, which must reverse the Trump Administration's deregulatory efforts and deal with climate change and severe weather issues. The Chesapeake Bay is the nation's largest estuary, with a watershed that includes parts of six states and the District of Columbia.

Tom Pelton, an award-winning environmental journalist, hosts NPR's "The Environment in Focus" since 2007. He is director of communications for the Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to holding polluters and governments accountable to protect public health. Previously, he was a senior writer for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and a reporter for The Baltimore Sun, where he was twice named one of the best environmental reporters in America by the Society of Environmental Journalists. Tom is the author of *The Chesapeake in Focus: Transforming the Natural World*.

You must register in advance for this meeting: <https://bit.ly/2Pbo4mK>. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email with details for joining the event. There will be a Q&A after the presentation. Submit questions in advance to: events@lwvbaltimorecounty.org. This event is open to ALL.

- Sharalyn Luciani, City/County Event Member

Member Appreciation Award Nominations

Our recipient of the 2021 LWV of Baltimore County Member Appreciation Award will be announced at our Annual Meeting luncheon on June 12, 2021! All members are eligible for consideration. This award is in recognition of a member's extraordinary contribution of time, talent and/or treasure toward achieving our goals of promoting voter participation and civic involvement. The recipient will be selected by the Board of Directors at the May 6, 2021, meeting and will receive a certificate of appreciation and a white vest embroidered with our LWV of Baltimore County logo. Prior recipients of the award included Katharine Stierhoff and Betsy Sexton. Please submit your nominations for this year's recipient of the Member Appreciation Award by May 3, 2021, to our Office Administrator, Maggy Lindgren, via email, contact@lwvbaltimorecounty.org, or telephone, 410-377-8046. Nominations should include the proposed recipient's name, years of service and reasons why you are nominating her or him for the award.



- Theresa Lawler, Board Director

COMMITTEES AND REPORTS

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

On April 1, 2021, Baltimore Sun reporters published an article about Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr.'s proposal to create the Department of Housing and Community Development, "an agency dedicated to housing, eviction and foreclosure prevention and community revitalization."¹ The office would help people find affordable homes or keep their current homes, coordinate functions that are currently spread out over a number of agencies, and ensure that the County's 2016 settlement with HUD, meant to "correct decades of policies and practices that perpetuated racial segregation", is fulfilled. The bill will likely be introduced to the County Council this April.

Baltimore County is one of the last large jurisdictions in MD without a public housing authority. In order to move forward on this proposal, the County Council needs to give its approval. According to the article, however, there is mixed reaction among council members. The county is progressing in its attempts to meet the terms of the 2016 HUD settlement that required the county to make 1,000 affordable housing units available by 2027. Though the county set a goal of 570 such units by the end of 2020, as of this past February, Baltimore County had only approved 513 affordable housing units.

Affordable housing is an important issue for the LWVBCo. Our position statement reads:

"Affordable housing opportunities should be made available for low- and moderate-income families and individuals throughout Baltimore County near centers of employment, public transportation, community-based support services, and where appropriate, in existing dwellings."

Over the years, we have advocated for affordable housing in the county; as recently as 2019, League members testified to the Baltimore County Council in support of the HOME Act, which was ultimately passed. Prior to the HOME Act, many county residents were turned away from rental housing because of the source of their income. The HOME Act (Housing Opportunities Made Equal) gives all residents – including those with Housing Choice Vouchers – a fair chance to have their rental applications considered; the Act does not prevent landlords from verifying applicants' incomes or checking their rental histories. This was a big win for working families, reducing the time it takes to find housing and making it easier to move closer to work.



Access to affordable housing is one way that burdened households can find a measure of security. This is especially true in times of extreme economic hardship, such as we have experienced since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. In April 2020, the unemployment rate in Maryland tripled from 3.5% to 9%.² Though that rate has dropped since then, as of February 2021, 6.2% of the labor force is still without a job. The impact on people's ability to pay for housing has been significant. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, over 15% of adult renters are behind on their rent; that number increases to 21% for renters living with children.³

Difficulty in paying for shelter is, unfortunately, not new. During this time of continued crisis, making sure people have access to affordable housing is especially crucial. The LWVBCo will continue to advocate for affordable housing by engaging with individuals, communities and policy makers to achieve this goal.

1 Baltimore Sun article, "Johnny Olszewski Jr. proposes legislation to establish Baltimore County housing department." <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-county/bs-md-co-department-housing-baltimore-county-20210401-yp74qe72njdkfb6bne6qu5joty-story.html>.

2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST240000000000005?amp%253bdata_tool=XG-table&output_view=data&include_graphs=true

3 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities article, "Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships", <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

MEMBERSHIP

We are LWV



League member Elaine Breslaw.

Elaine Breslaw has come full circle as a LWV Baltimore County member, returning to her home chapter after moving to Charlestown last September. Elaine first joined the League in the 1970s and kept her membership active as she moved to Baltimore City and then to Knoxville, TN.

It was in Knoxville that this retired professor took an active role in League activities. As a member of the Observer Corps, Elaine went to County Council meetings and reported on their activities for the membership. It was also in Knoxville that Elaine began registering voters, where she found her passion. Upon her return to Baltimore City in 2016, Elaine volunteered with Argentine Craig to register new citizens as voters. "It was such a happy occasion," Elaine said, "and the League was there to help people take their first steps toward voting." Elaine quickly became the Coordinator for Voter Registration, working with various local groups and organizations who were willing to implement voter registration through their activities. As a result of her outreach and leadership, Elaine and her 100+ volunteers registered new voters at street festivals, church events, theater performances and food distribution events, to name just a few.

Voting was always a draw for Elaine. In fact, the League's Voters' Guides were how Elaine first got connected to the League. "The information I received just before elections was so very important," recalls Elaine, "especially in a time before the internet." Elaine had always been interested in politics and what was happening at a national level, but reading the Guide's information on local politics taught her how important politics at home were, too.

Elaine is the League. She likes being part of a non-partisan group that helps inform voters and does whatever it can to encourage people to vote. "Registering to vote and then going out to vote, it's what makes a democracy work," she says. Elaine looks forward to a day in the near future when she can be back in the courthouses and communities, doing her part to register voters and encourage voting. Because of volunteers like Elaine, the League is able to fulfill its mission of empowering county residents.



Join a Committee

Advocacy and Action

Volunteer a few hours a week to help us make a difference in Baltimore County! Our Advocacy and Action Committee needs your help to:

- Track issues of interest in the county, including: education, environment, health care, police reform, redistricting, transportation and voting.
- Observe County Council meetings.
- Assist in leading our advocacy efforts as a co-chair for the committee.

Please contact our Membership Chair, Ericka McDonald, at elmcd@lwvbaltimorecounty.org, or complete our online volunteer form to get involved.



Membership Happy Hour

Connect with new and old friends engaged in empowering voters and defending democracy in Baltimore County!

Each month we'll have casual conversations about social interest topics ranging from headlines to memes, political to pop culture, and all the points in between. This month we'll start with a discussion of racism, books, and Dr. Seuss.

So grab a drink and join us for a casual conversation on **Wednesday, April 14th from 7-8:30pm** via Google Meet. Visit our web calendar at https://www.lwvbaltimorecounty.org/calendar_events to join the meeting.



- Ericka McDonald, Membership Chair

MEMBERSHIP

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

LWV is an organization fully committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to engage all citizens, communities and policy makers in creating a more perfect democracy. How do we define these concepts?

Diversity - All of the similarities and differences among people. Diversity refers to population groups that have been historically underrepresented in socially, politically, or economically powerful institutions and organizations. Diversity is about a collective or a group and can only exist in relationship to others.

Equity - An approach based in fairness to ensuring everyone is given equal opportunity. Equity takes into account that people have different access to resources because of systems of oppression and privilege. Improving equity involves increasing justice and fairness.

Inclusion - The degree to which diverse individuals are able to participate fully in the decision-making processes within an organization or group. Inclusion is an ongoing process, not a static state of being. An inclusive environment ensures equitable access to resources and opportunities for all.

The LWVBCo strives to make our chapter as diverse, equitable and inclusive as possible, that's why we have created a DEI Task Force which is working to create a Diversity Policy and apply it throughout the work we do at the League. Want to be a part of this change? Contact Membership Chair Ericka McDonald at elmcd@lwbaltimorecounty.org and attend a meeting.

You can also learn more about the League's policy and resources by visiting the LWV website at www.lwv.org, under League Management/DEI. There you'll find the DEI [guide](#) and monthly [webinars](#) on topics ranging from gender identity to intergenerational equity.

Register for the webinar on [Surveys and Demographic Collection](#) on April 22nd at 7pm by visiting the LWVUS DEI webinar page.

- Ericka McDonald, Membership Chair

Goodbye Kitty

This month we say goodbye to a LWVBCo founding member, Katherine (Kitty) Stierhoff. Kitty joined the League in the early 1960s and stayed active until her passing. During her tenure, Kitty published the newsletter, served as treasurer and Board VP, represented the League on the boards of the former Community Action Agency (now the Community Assistance Network) and the Fuel Fund of Central Maryland.

Kitty advocated extensively to address affordable housing shortcomings, chairing the League's Housing Committee and serving as the VP for the Baltimore City/County Housing Committee she helped form. In 2005, Kitty represented the League on an advisory council tasked with ameliorating discriminatory housing policies in Baltimore City.

Because of her exceptional service and commitment, Kitty was presented the LWVBCo's first Annual Member Appreciation Award in 2019. Kitty's presence, energy and activism will be missed.



OF INTEREST

LWVUS and LWVGA Condemn Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

“The League of Women Voters grieves the murders of the eight individuals who were killed on Tuesday, March 16th, and the countless other AAPI lives that have been tragically taken as a result of racially motivated violence. We mourn those who have lost their lives or been harmed, mentally or physically, as a result of anti-Asian xenophobia and racism.

“Anti-AAPI racism is not new to our country, whose history includes the creation of internment camps, the Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited Chinese laborers, as well as countless acts of violence. Yet in the past year, we have witnessed a disturbing increase in attacks targeting AAPIs, often in connection with [myths about COVID-19](#).

“Together, the League of Women Voters of the United States and the League of Women Voters of Georgia call on law enforcement officials to seek justice for those murdered on Tuesday night. Additionally, we urge Attorney General Garland and FBI Director Wray to prioritize the investigation of anti-AAPI hate crimes. We cannot fight the racism, hate, and impunity that threaten the lives of AAPIs unless our leadership takes the necessary actions to denounce racist violence and demand accountability in its wake.

“The League stands in solidarity with AAPI communities. We are committed to listening to and amplifying AAPI voices and educating ourselves on the historic and ongoing systemic racism that plagues this country so that we can be better allies.

“We urge our followers to do the same, and to call on elected and appointed officials at all levels of government to demonstrate their commitment to keeping ALL communities safe. There can be no liberty in the face of racist and xenophobic violence.”

- LWVUS blog post dated 3/18/21



Confronting Racism. Embracing Diversity April 28

Join the LWV San Diego on [April 28, 2:30pm](#), for a panel discussion on the history of discrimination of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) in America, focusing on the intersectionality of misogyny and racism among AAPI women. During this event you will also learn how the San Diego Asian business community fared over the past year while national figures spewed dangerous and racially motivated rhetoric to scapegoat Asian Americans. Visit the LWV San Diego website at my.lwv.org/california/san-diego to register.

For more about the history of AAPI discrimination and violence in the U.S., view the PBS docuseries, “Asian Americans”, which looks at the past 150 years of U.S. history through the lens of this country’s Asian American and Pacific Islander immigrants — a group that faced violence and prejudice long before 2021. To view the series, visit PBS at www.pbs.org/show/asian-americans/.



Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century

In 2018, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) co-sponsored the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, in which scholars, journalists, policy makers and citizen leaders spent two years engaging with communities across the nation to explore how best to respond to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our political life. In June 2020, the Commission issued their report, “Our Common Purpose”, full of bold and inspiring ideas on how to increase citizen engagement in their communities, counter threats to self-government, and rebuild trust in political institutions.



On March 24, 2021, Harvard University’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and the AAAS hosted a discussion with the chairs of the Commission to discuss their findings and how America can be made stronger by the engagement of all Americans. To view the discussion, visit <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose>.

LEAGUE EVENTS - SAVE THE DATE

LWVMD Virtual Day on Capital Hill April 29



Join the LWVMD on April 29 for its Virtual Day on Capital Hill. This is also the LWVUS "Day of Action" and will be focused on voting rights, including the "For the People"

Act (H.R.1/S.1, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act), redistricting reform, and D.C. statehood.

According to the LWVUS, the "For the People" Act will put power back into the hands of American voters by making voting easier and more accessible and by modernizing future elections. The bill has been passed in the House - it is now time for the Senate to fulfill their duty for our democracy.

In regard to D.C. statehood, the LWVUS reports that more than 700,000 residents live in D.C., more than Wyoming and Vermont combined, yet its residents still lack voting members in the U.S. House and Senate. Without these voting members, residents of D.C. are denied a voice in Congress to defend them from attacks on their own locally passed laws and citizen backed initiatives. Residents in D.C. deserve full representation in Congress.

As we did last year, we will use Zoom for a series of meetings, roughly twenty minutes each, with the Maryland Congressional delegation, during which we can make our pitch and engage in some questions and answers with our representatives (or their staff). The Zoom meetings will be with both Senators and each of the Representatives' offices where we have interested members who want to participate. Participants will be briefed by email about the LWVUS topic for advocacy, participating voluntarily.

This is a FREE, LWV members only event that takes place on Thursday, April 29, from 10am - 4:30pm. To participate, you must register in advance. You can register by visiting the LWVMD website at www.lwvmd.org and navigating to the Events page. Please register no later than Friday, April 23. We hope to "see" you there.

People Powered Fair Maps Pep Rally April 29

During the redistricting process, new district lines can be drawn to intentionally decrease voters' power based solely on their political party. Join



the LWVUS on **Thursday, April 29, at 10am**, for a pep rally to kick-off their People Powered Day of Action. The rally will be hosted by LWV CEO, Virginia Kase, who will be joined by leaders from Leagues and advocacy groups from across the nation. Be part of a movement that strives for a fair and transparent redistricting process. To join the event, visit the LWV website at www.lwv.org/redistricting/people-powered-day-action.

LWVMD Convention June 5

PARTICIPATE



Mark your calendars for the 2021 LWVMD Convention on June 5; a second day is likely. Due to the ongoing global pandemic, this year's event will again be virtual. During the convention we will be considering adoption of studies, election of officers, State positions, an annual budget and all with a mix of fun and education. All members are welcome to attend. We will provide details as they become available.

LWVB Co Annual Meeting June 18

The LWVB Co Annual Meeting is just a couple of months away, so block off Friday, June 18.

This year, members can choose to participate via live-streaming or in-person at the Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills; social distancing protocols and other safety measures will be practiced to ensure a safe and healthy gathering. More details on the event will be available in the coming months.



OF INTEREST

Then and Now: How Two Pandemics Tested the Power of Women



Virginia Kase,
CEO LWVUS

The situation was critical. The outcome of elections across the US would determine the fate of the nation, yet voters faced an additional threat: a growing pandemic. In the months before the national election, mask mandates were passed, cities and states shut down, social gatherings banned, and almost 200,000 Americans had died due to a rampant virus. Political campaigns suspended in-person activities. Polling locations tried to determine how to open safely and protect voters. Millions of Americans started thinking through their voting plans so that they could make their voices heard despite the threat of viral contagion.

The year was 1918. And amid all of this, women were fighting for their right to political representation.

“Everything conspires against women’s suffrage. Now it is the influenza.”
—A local suffragist in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, October 1918.

Two years later, women won their right to vote, even with the pandemic still raging. Their cause was more powerful than the virus.

2020 saw us facing an eerily similar story, with the country facing both critical elections and a life-changing pandemic. Once again, women stepped forward to meet the challenges of their time, head-on, with grit and determination. We honor those who came before us and those who stand with us now as we continue the fight for a more perfect democracy.

Then: Women Rise Despite Pandemic Risks

“These are sad times for the whole world, grown unexpectedly sadder by the sudden and sweeping epidemic of influenza. This new affliction is bringing sorrow into many suffrage homes and is presenting a serious new obstacle in our Referendum campaigns and in the Congressional and Senatorial campaigns. We must therefore be prepared for failure.”

— Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, in a letter to supporters in 1918

When the 1918 flu pandemic overtook the nation, women had already gained momentum for a constitutional amendment securing their right to vote. Movement organizers were naturally concerned that the pandemic would derail their progress. The pandemic did indeed slow progress of the amendment even among suffragists. All their activities to support the movement were stymied by the health crisis, including public speeches, rallies, and donation collections.

“Just when we had plans developed for a renewed and revised campaign along comes the influenza and cuts off all possibility of public speaking and even meetings in open air. So many homes have been touched in each locality, if not with the actual disease, with the dreadful fear which seems to be worse, that we have not been able to work with the individual voter.”

—A local organizer

Despite the crisis, suffragists would not be deterred. They found ways to gather safely and have their voices heard. They made their priorities known to decision makers in the halls of government as well as voters across the country.

Inspiringly, they managed to keep the dream alive despite the health risks. They safely organized, assembled, and protested in cities and towns across the nation. Advocates held conventions and publicly challenged national and state policymakers to support the 19th amendment. In Chicago, the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association went ahead with its annual convention, excluding the public and positioning chairs four feet apart.

The movement would not be derailed, even if it cost women their jobs and had dramatic impacts on their

OF INTEREST

Then and Now: How Two Pandemics Tested the Power of Women, cont.

families and homes. The campaign for the right to vote continued through the challenges and losses of the pandemic, World War I, and the often-violent opposition to women's suffrage.

In August 1920, the hard work, perseverance, and sacrifices experienced during the pandemic paid off. The 19th amendment was ratified, and women won the right to vote. This was a significant victory, yet imperfect, as not ALL women were able to exercise their newly found right to vote because of racism and discrimination. Sadly, today we see far too many parallels to what we saw a century ago, with ongoing, rampant voter suppression and laws that far too disproportionately impact Black and brown voters.

Now: Women Lead Through a Pandemic

"I have always loved election day and the process of voting, and vote in every election. For years, I told my husband I wanted to volunteer 'one day.' Then, as COVID exploded across the country and it became clear that many regular volunteers might be afraid or unable to help, I knew my 'one day' had come. I volunteered to go anywhere in the county that might need additional help. I was particularly concerned about historically disenfranchised voters and less affluent areas of town."

– First-time poll worker Kristin Rosengren, Richmond, VA.

In 2020, during one of the most significant and contentious elections in decades, women faced a new public health crisis: COVID-19. More than one hundred years after the 1918 pandemic, Americans stared down this new foe and, once again, women led and supported their communities through civil and political unrest, unprecedented voter suppression, and simultaneous economic and healthcare crises.

Women answered the call of democracy and worked the front lines of elections nationwide. Like their 1918 counterparts, they organized and identified procedures that would ensure the safety of voters while allowing as many as possible to participate.

League members and women across the country provided leadership and service as election processes were adapted or reimaged. As the number of poll worker volunteers dwindled due to the threat of COVID-19 exposure, women saw a need and they filled it. They kept the polls open for multiple days and supported mail-in ballots and absentee ballot collection, counting, processing, and auditing.

"Retirees usually volunteer to be poll workers, but with COVID-19, many were hesitant to put themselves at risk. I wanted to give older volunteers the option of putting their health first. I was worried about catching COVID-19, but felt somewhat young people, like me, were less at risk."

– First-time poll worker Linda Sabelhaus, Washington, D.C.

Women also fought voter suppression policies and tactics by organizing and educating to build political power – and when that wasn't effective, they fought legal battles and built campaigns to protect the rights of voters in all communities.

While contentious, the 2020 election cycle—including primaries and races up and down the ballot—happened with the largest voter participation in a general election in U.S. history. Over 159 million people voted in the U.S. general election due to the service and sacrifice of women leading, managing, and supporting voters.

Future: Women's Impact on Democracy During a Pandemic

The 1918 Election happened – despite the pandemic – on November 4, 1918, as scheduled. The 2020 Election happened – despite another pandemic – on November 3, 2020, as scheduled.

We celebrate how women power the vote, and our democracy, every day. We celebrate the determination of the women who raise their hands every time the world requires their sacrifice, creativity, and ability to get things done. As history has demonstrated, even during a global health crisis, women play a critical role in democracy and will not only rise, but lead.

– Virginia Kase, LWVUS CEO
3/30/21 blog post

League of Women Voters of Baltimore County
6600 York Road, Suite 211
Baltimore, MD 21212
Return service requested

LEAGUE OFFICE HOURS
Tuesday, Thursday, 10am-1pm
410-377-8046
contact@lwvbaltimorecounty.org
www.LWVBaltimoreCounty.org



Membership

Open to all men and women

Not a member yet?

Join Today!

- * Call the office at 410-377-8046
- * Visit us at www.lwvbaltimorecounty.org

**Create Positive Change
Join the League Today!**

BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2020-21

Co-Presidents: Tana Stevenson, Camille Wheeler

1st VP: Eileen Robier

2nd VP: Barbara Crain

Secretary: Judith Schagrin

Treasurer: Neilson Andrews

Elected Directors: Sue Garonzik, Camille Marx,
Ericka McDonald, Phyllis Panopoulos, Ralph Rigger,
Betsy Sexton, Carol Wynne

Newsletter: Stacey Morrison

Office Manager: Maggy Lindgren