

AGENDA FOR RENEWAL: AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Good evening. First let me say how pleased I am to be here and how much I appreciate the invitation to join you at your state convention.

I want to talk with you this evening about an Agenda for Renewal of both American Democracy and the League of Women Voters. The bad news is that our democracy itself and the League of Women Voters have been - and are - at risk. But the good news is that by working together we can renew them both. We know the problems. We know the issues. And in many cases we know what needs to be done. In others we know we need to find out what needs to be done and then commit to doing it.

LEAGUE MISSION & MEMBERSHIP

I don't have to tell you that the League stands for participation and involvement at a time when we need to focus anew on how fundamentally important these things are to our democracy and to our organization.

Our mission is to energize citizens and build civic engagement. But, we can't hope to do that if we are not a strong, vibrant organization of members. We cannot be a voice for citizens and a force for change without a growing membership.

Our founder proposed the idea for a League of Women Voters to enable others to "finish the fight" that began when the 19th Amendment was passed. She believed that women needed to understand the basics of voting, but she also knew that they needed to understand the issues.

We are the inheritors of that struggle and vision of truly extraordinary women. We owe it to our founders to build the membership of this organization so that it can finish the fight.

I challenged League members in my acceptance speech at the 2004 convention to make it possible to say with pride at the end of election day 2004 that – in addition to registering new voters, educating voters and getting them to the polls – we had also shared our passion for the League of Women Voters with our fellow citizens and invited them to be a part of our great organization.

I am thrilled to be able to say that Leagues across the nation met that challenge. Perhaps we didn't grow quite as much as we would have liked – but we did grow – and for the first time in a number of years.

So, what have we been doing – and what do we plan to do - to continue to renew our great organization. What is our agenda to renew the League of Women Voters and address the risks it faces?

The first thing we need to do is recognize the essential connection between visibility and membership growth. We need to think strategically about how to translate the great work we do on issues at every level into opportunities for visibility and membership growth. We all face the same set of challenges, challenges we will meet only by working together. At the national level we continue to approach our work from a focused and disciplined perspective, while always thinking how to get the most out of each opportunity and how to create opportunities to grow the organization.

And so how have we - and do we - gain visibility and, through visibility, gain members? How do we use issues to engage our communities and build the League?

The first step is to choose a few things to do and do them well. We have to focus on activities that will both engage people outside the League and energize those already in the League. We must reach out to non-members, find new coalition partners and develop new media relationships. We must tell our story with a clear and consistent message of who we are, what we do and why we matter.

Visibility

In a presidential election year, it was relatively easy for the League to be visible to the public. At the national level, in the two months leading up to the election, we launched and promoted our “5 Things You Need to Know on Election Day” voter education campaign. Our goal was to empower voters to take action to ensure their vote would be counted. I traveled to 20 cities in 8 states and promoted the message in more than 100 media interviews. We got great visibility because of a concise, clear message, and because Leagues across the country distributed almost a million “5 Things” cards. And, in the states I visited, local and state League representatives joined me in editorial board meetings and radio and newspaper interviews, providing the essential local and state perspective to support the national message.

And, the League’s Democracy Network web site, better known as DNet, continued to be one of the best online resources available to help educate voters on the issues and candidates. We registered 10 million page views on Election Day alone and nearly 60 million throughout the year. DNet’s tremendous success in Election 2004 was due to the efforts of League members across the country who logged more than 60,000 hours promoting the web site and generating information for DNet.

As you know, DNet is not operating in 2005, but we are pursuing raising funds to operate it in 2006.

Whether it’s an election year or not, the League is always visible in our communities through public forums and conferences.

All of the hard work of Leagues around the country has resulted in the League being awarded the 2005 Freedom Award from the National Association of Secretaries of State. It will be my honor to accept that award this summer in St. Paul, MN.

In addition to being visible to the public, we have to be visible to our members. At the national level, I am happy to say that our electronic newsletter, launched just over a year ago, has been a tremendous success. And, of course, our national VOTER magazine continues to be a high quality way to stay visible to both our members and the public at large. And we’ve been working hard for the past number of months to design our new web site. That should be completed in the next few months, giving us a web site that is much more user friendly for our members and the public than our current one.

Membership

We know that visibility is essential to build membership. But, we’re also looking for other secrets to success. To that end, we’ve just completed a survey of about 45 Leagues across the country that have shown consistent membership growth over the past six years in an effort to find common themes. We’re still analyzing the data, but among the Leagues surveyed, we have found that the vast majority consider the following to be very important to their membership success:

- Interesting programs and activities
- A focus on topics of great interest to the community
- High level of visibility
- Flexible opportunities for individuals to participate in the League
- The League’s reputation

But, we know that we don't have all the answers as to how to increase membership. If we did, we wouldn't keep the answer a secret! To that end, if delegates to Council approve the proposed 2005-06 budget next week, we will be seeking outside professional help in developing a membership recruitment plan. We want some professional advice from those who have helped organizations grow their grassroots membership, have the capacity to assist us in assessing the best course of action and can assist in creating a message that will attract members. We've previously looked at these kinds of issues internally. What we haven't done is seek professional advice and then follow that advice. This time we will!

With professional assistance, if we work together and offer a clearly defined membership message that focuses on what we do, why it is important and what new members will gain from membership – we will grow!

DEMOCRACY AGENDA

The League also believes that American democracy is at risk and that now is the time to act. Years of band-aid solutions and neglect have allowed many of our government systems to weaken. Our Democracy Agenda presents viable solutions to help overcome these weaknesses and educate communities and citizens on how to improve things. This effort seeks to protect our electoral processes through election reform and campaign finance reform, advance our representative government through nonpartisan redistricting, and preserve our constitutional rights by safeguarding civil liberties.

Democracy is at risk when long lines and faulty voting processes keep Americans from voting and having their votes counted. Democracy is at risk when partisan gerrymandering ensures that elections are over before the people even vote. Democracy is at risk when government actions threaten basic civil liberties. And, democracy is at risk when special interests pay for election campaigns. We must renew and repair our democracy so that it truly works for all citizens.

Election Reform

The first item on our agenda is Election Reform. We relearned an important civics lesson in 2000 and again in 2004 - that the mechanisms of elections are critical.

The Help America Vote Act impacts every part of the voting process, from voting machines to provisional ballots, from voter registration to poll worker training. It established new federal requirements for elections and shifted control over elections from localities to states.

While we avoided another meltdown in 2004, that was because the margin of victory exceeded the margin of error in our systems. But there are still significant problems that, had the election been only 20-30,000 votes closer in Ohio, would have caused another constitutional crisis. And the problems existed in many states.

So we are focusing on the key election administration issues that must be dealt with for 2006, 2008 and beyond - provisional ballots, statewide voter registration lists, voting systems, polling place operations, and poll worker recruitment and training.

The federal requirement for provisional ballots was the first major impact of HAVA for the voters. There was good news and bad news from the 2004 election. The good news is that significant numbers of provisional ballots were issued to voters and a high percentage of those ballots were counted in many states. According to a study by electionline.org, two-thirds of the more than 1.6 million provisional ballots cast were counted. That suggests that provisional ballots did enfranchise eligible Americans. The bad news is that not every eligible voter who was entitled to one, received a provisional ballot, and not every vote cast by an eligible voter was counted. And, the percentage of provisional votes counted varied from a high in Alaska of 97% to a low in Delaware of 6%.

Ultimately, the promise of the provisional balloting system set up by HAVA was not fully realized in the 2004 general election.

The lack of timeliness in issuing standards and developing systems was a problem, as was the time available for verifying and counting provisional ballots. At least one state allows only two days to determine whether to count individual provisional ballots, while others have a process that allows two weeks.

The 2004 elections were only the first test for the Help America Vote Act and there is still work to be done. We need failsafe voting mechanisms provided by provisional ballots, accurate and complete statewide voter registration lists, machines that work, 21st century rather than 19th century polling place operations, and a well trained, technically savvy, diverse workforce at the polls on Election Day.

Campaign Finance Reform

The League also continues to have serious questions about the role of money and special interests in American politics. We believe that “he who pays the piper calls the tune” and that’s why public financing of elections is our ultimate goal and a key part of our democracy agenda.

As you know, the League has been involved in campaign finance reform efforts for years and worked hard for the passage of McCain-Feingold.

But more needs to be done!

- **527 organizations:** The 2004 elections saw unprecedented spending on advertising and voter mobilization by political groups that are tax exempt under Section 527 of the Internal Revenue Code. Thus the name “527s”. We believe that the Federal Election Commission (FEC) failed to enforce current law to require such organizations to register and be governed by campaign finance regulations. As a result, millions of dollars of soft money were used to influence the presidential election and will likely be used in the 2006 congressional elections, if action isn’t taken. Senators McCain and Feingold have introduced legislation to require all 527s to register as political committees with the FEC. Under the legislation, 527s running ads that promote or attack federal candidates would be required to use only hard money.
- **financing presidential elections:** The League also believes that public financing of elections is important to protect our democratic system of government. The presidential public financing system has worked well, if not perfectly, for decades. But the system is in trouble. Set up after the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, it tried to create a political system that was open and responsive to all citizens – equally. On April 15th, when you completed your federal income tax forms, I hope you checked the box to take \$3 of the taxes you’d already paid and put it in the Presidential Election Fund. Obviously, the size of the Presidential Election Fund depends entirely on the number of people who check the box. Unfortunately, the system has been overcome by events. In the 2004 presidential primary election season, President Bush, Senator Kerry and Howard Dean all opted out of the public financing system. We need to reform the system to ensure that the public financing of presidential elections remains.

Civil Liberties

A third focus of the League’s democracy agenda is the basic civil liberties that under gird our system of representative democracy. The right to speak freely, to assemble freely, to read and debate freely is essential for a vibrant democracy. When the government can investigate what books you read or take out of the library, as is allowed with the current so-called USA Patriot Act, then basic civil liberties have been called into question.

Many of the key provisions of the Act undermine civil liberties, including the “sneak and peek” warrants that allow the government to search your home or business without notifying you or without a search warrant

ahead of time. Protecting against terrorism is important, but so too is protecting against government intimidation. A balance between homeland security and civil liberties is necessary, but finding that balance is challenging. The League will be closely monitoring congressional action as several key provisions of the Patriot Act come up for “sunset.” If they are to continue, Congress must reauthorize them.

We are supporting the SAFE Act (Security and Freedom Enhancement) of 2005 sponsored by Senators Larry Craig (R-ID) and Richard Durbin (D-IL) that was introduced on April 6th. I was privileged to represent the League at the press conference held by the senators in Washington to announce their introduction of the bill. We think this act will address the concerns of the American people about the excesses of the USA Patriot Act. By placing limits on “sneak and peek” searches and “John Doe” roving wiretaps and requiring increased public recording of the use of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, it will protect innocent Americans from unrestricted government surveillance. It is a bill supported by a wide spectrum of organizations. In fact, as an editorial in the Arizona Republic on April 6th noted, “When the ACLU, the American Conservative Union and the League of Women Voters all agree that something needs to be fixed, it’s not a sign of creeping paranoia. It’s a sign it really needs to be fixed.”

The League has also launched “Local Voices: Citizen Conversations on Civil Liberties and Secure Communities,” an eight-month initiative to foster public dialogue about the balance between civil liberties and homeland security. In this post-9/11 world, it is critical for all communities to explore the relationship between these two topics. And while League-led conversations under this grant will take place in 10 cities that are ethnically, economically and geographically diverse, the materials are available to all Leagues. We encourage you to use the discussion materials in your own communities and those materials are available now for download from our web site. There are wonderful opportunities for visibility for all Leagues around this project and I urge you all to take full advantage of them.

The outcomes of the conversations in the 10 selected cities will be gathered, analyzed, and compared with larger national trends. A final report will be released this fall to coincide with the congressional debate about the sunset provisions of the Patriot Act. And, believe me, we will make the release of that report as visible as possible!

Redistricting

Another issue that goes to the heart of the democratic system is partisan redistricting, or gerrymandering. This controversy is as old as the Republic. Now, I’m sure that most of you know that the term gerrymander itself comes from Governor Gerry of Massachusetts, who created an election district so long and misshapen that it looked like a salamander – hence the name Gerry – mander. Today, with the advent of modern computers and intensifying partisanship, it is possible to create legislative districts where the results of an election will be known before any votes are cast or counted. This is just what is happening across the nation. And it threatens our democracy.

In some states, incumbents of both parties get together to protect themselves from a real election. In other states, one party or another draws the districts so they will have many more seats than they would be entitled to if fair lines were drawn. In either case, the people are locked out.

It is time to do something about this trend. It is time to stop partisan redistricting and develop mechanisms in the states to ensure fair results, so that elections themselves determine the shape of our legislatures.

The underlying theme for redistricting is the same as the underlying theme for the League’s work on election reform and other Democracy Agenda issues: Voters should determine who represents them.

CONCLUSION

I've outlined some of the needs of both the League and our democracy if we are to renew and revitalize them both. Our Democracy Agenda of election reform, campaign finance reform, civil liberties and redistricting is also a citizen's agenda. And we need to invite those citizens into the League as members and supporters. By tackling the tough problems in our communities we will have impact and be visible. And that visibility will help us attract members – here in Pennsylvania and across the country.

We all know that we must maintain the core principles of the League of Women Voters to be true to our heritage. But we also must be flexible and creative as we meet the challenges of our changed world if we are to continue to be a “robust” organization.

Paul Light, a scholar at the Brookings Institution recently completed and published research on “how robust organizations achieve extraordinary results.” His conclusions apply – I think – to the League of Women Voters. So, let me leave you with the four traits he identified as being common to high performing organizations, as identified in a Washington Post column by Stephen Barr on March 30th.

- “Robust organizations are alert to changing circumstances, which can make them vulnerable or provide them opportunities, and focus on the future.”
- “They respond quickly to signs of change and are able to move people and money where needed quickly.”
- “As the future unfolds, these organizations experiment with new ways of thinking and doing business. In short, they do not stick with their original game plan forever.”
- There “is a commitment by organization leaders to keep their eyes on the mission.”

I submit that our agenda for the League of Women Voters will ensure that we remain a robust organization - and that our agenda for America will ensure a robust democracy.

Thank you!