IMPACT THEN, IMPACT NOW, IMPACT IN THE FUTURE

Thank you all so much for inviting me. It is a pleasure to be here in the great state of Texas. Living where I do, I understand that there are many reasons to celebrate in a year when the state legislature does not meet, but for me the principal reason to be glad the Texas legislature meets every other year is that I always get to come to the Texas Convention.

Attending state conventions is always a real privilege. So much of the job of a national board member is figuring out ways to make the League look good. The League looks good when our state and local leagues are visible and active in their communities speaking up for what is best for all of us. When that is happening, not only does the League look good, but we at LWVUS look good and we love it. I can tell you for an absolute fact, ya’ll here in Texas make the League look good!

Our strength has always been our grassroots volunteers. Without the grassroots, we would not have the right vote, we would not have been a force for change in our communities and we cannot have impact in the future.

In just a few short years we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage. That is an important milestone for every woman in America, but it is particularly significant for the League. Not only do we commemorate getting the vote, but we also celebrate our own 100th anniversary. For us, the fight did not end with the 19th amendment, it began.

Anytime we reach an important milestone, 50 years, 75 years, 90 years, we always look back to our roots in the suffrage movement. We break out the long dresses and big hats because that is the image we have of the movement because marches and demonstrations get photographed. But the true campaign for the vote can’t be seen in photographs. It can be experienced by reading our history and I would argue, by belonging to the League of Women Voters.

To begin with, the struggle spanned generations. The women who started the movement, did not live to cast a ballot. The women who finally won the vote, built on the successes and failures of their predecessors. They learned from one another how to persuade, how to move public opinion and how to make the political process work for them, even though they lacked the one common currency of that process: the vote.

When we break out the big hats, the yellow sashes and the long dresses, we commemorate the ultimate success and with the benefit of hindsight, we can see the history of the suffrage movement as a straight line from Seneca Falls, NY to Nashville, TN. But the line was far from straight. The goal was simple and direct, but the strategy for achieving it was anything but.

Our founders knew what impact they wanted to have. They wanted to amend the constitution to give women the right to vote. They weren’t working from a road map. They had to adapt and improvise. So
often we think of our suffrage mothers as uncompromising, unyielding, marching straight forward all the time towards that federal amendment. That is absolutely not true.

There were a lot of detours through the states along the way. The western territories needed voting citizens to achieve statehood. No problem, women were more than happy to accept the vote in order to oblige. One-party states wanted to keep it that way by letting women vote in the all-important primaries. Suffragists would take it. If local elections could be opened to women, more power to them.

The winning plan, laid out in utmost secret on a hot summer day in 1916, was an all-out assault on all fronts, local, state and national by volunteers of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Carrie Chapman Catt. It had to be secret so that the opposition would be caught off guard by the breadth of the assault. Only with a national organization, only with volunteers on the ground in every state could this even have been contemplated. And it worked.

We all know the story of the 1919 National Woman Suffrage Association convention in St. Louis commemorating the 50th anniversary of woman suffrage in Wyoming, the first state ever to give women the vote. It was at that convention, with victory in sight that Mrs. Catt called for the most natural, the most appropriate, the most patriotic memorial to the suffrage movement: a League of Women Voters to finish the fight.

Such a league would be appropriate, she said, because what could be more appropriate than that women should do for the coming generations, what those of the preceding period did for them?

In a word that is what we are doing here today. We come together to celebrate the work that the Texas League has done and plan for the work it will do. The work you do so well here in Texas builds on the work of your predecessors as well as the work of all the rest of the Leagues and their predecessors. You are doing for coming generations of women what was done for you. You are giving back the knowledge and the experience that you have gained, often through a lifetime of association with the League of Women Voters.

The fight to engage citizens in a democracy is never finished. Democracy only works when an informed citizenry decides to get and stay involved. That was why the League was created: to engage the millions of new women voters in 1920; that is what the League has continued to do for every voter in the 94 years since.

Over those years we have had tremendous impact. Not by taking positions and staunchly never budging, but by letting the principles of a sound, democratic system guide us. Our faith in a government of the people, by the people and for the people, has never failed us. It has allowed us to survive red scares, depressions, world wars, cold wars, economic ups and downs and it is what will ultimately sustain us through this period of political polarization.

The League was an experiment. Nothing like had ever been tried before. Nearly 100 years later, I would maintain nothing like it has ever really been tried again. Good government and public interest groups abound, to the detriment of our volunteer base, but nothing comes close to the experience the League offers. I cannot think of one other national organization with affiliates in all fifty states and hundreds of local communities that does the work that our volunteers do.

What other organization mobilized the way we did when the assault on voting rights began in 2005? Even the civil rights community did not respond as quickly and decisively as we did. Thanks to our focus on election issues following the 2000 presidential election and our many years of voter service work in every election at every level, we saw the threat posed by the first voter ID laws in Georgia and Indiana. Because we have state Leagues with volunteer lobbyists in every state legislature, we were on
the ground when those laws were first introduced. Because we have members in local communities, we had a network of voters to react to action alerts in this area.

And when the coordinated assault came in 2011 we were ready. We had the expertise; we had learned the lessons of the early battles; we had the staff and funding in place to support an all-out effort across the majority of the states. We have been astonishingly successful. That is something that I do not have to tell you here in Texas. You have used every tool in your arsenal, you have played every political angle and you protected the vote in 2012 and you will continue to protect the vote moving forward. Because of the all-out push back that the League was able to make, we protected the vote not just here in Texas but all across America.

Like our suffragist founders, we have not always succeeded, but we have hung together and supported each other every step of the way. The most important lesson that service on the national board has taught me is that we are all in this together. The true value of belonging to a national organization is the weight that organization gives to action at all levels of government. If it is a local issue that we are trying to impact, the local League goes into the debate with all the importance that national branding gives. The benefit we all get from belonging to the League is the power the organization gives to our voices and the experience we gain in working hands-on to improve our democracy because our real audience is our community.

As we count down to 2020, we only have to look around us to see that there is a lot of work to do. In the area of elections,

1. Voting Rights Act
2. National Voting Rights Act
3. Affordable Care Act/National Voting Rights Act
4. Continued work in the states
5. Bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration
6. 2014 election work

In the area of campaign finance,

1. McCutcheon
2. IRS rulemaking
3. Updating our member understanding of this fast moving issue
4.

In the environment,

1. EPA rulemaking
2. Keystone pipeline
3. Climate change task force work
4. State work on fracking

The work is not easy and there are no shortcuts. That is what our founders encountered in fighting to get the vote. They knew that getting the vote meant taking on the responsibility of citizenship. That responsibility is never over.

There is a reason that Carrie Catt called for a League of Women Voters to finish the fight. In her words, the league is a living memorial to the suffragists. We are that memorial. We are the League carrying on the work of our founders. Their strength was the stamina to stay in for the long haul and that is our strength as well.
Thank you for all the work you do to keep the League strong, your community strong and our democracy the best in the world.