



## The Democracy Farm

**By Linda Bjella and Marti Hemwall, Co-Presidents**

A recent article published in the Post-Crescent focused on a disconcerting trend the League of Women Voters has had to confront: some candidates are claiming that the League misrepresents itself as nonpartisan and they therefore refuse to participate in our efforts to inform the public on their candidacy or positions. This falsehood undermines the credibility of the League, but more importantly, it does a serious disservice to the voters.

Our mission statement says we “empower voters and defend democracy”. That statement describes the two primary functions of the League: voter service and advocacy. We help people cast an informed vote and we lobby our elected representatives to keep our democracy strong. We are staunchly nonpartisan in both of those realms, and we take great care to keep them separate.

Let’s use an analogy of a farm: The Democracy Farm, we can call it. On a farm, when the crops are harvested, grain is put into silos, with different types of grain in each one. The League’s Democracy Farm has two silos: voter service and advocacy. We keep those two silos separate, but without both types of grain, our Democracy Farm can’t succeed. We need both informed voters and we need laws that provide for greater and more equitable participation in our democratic society.

There is a perception that because of our advocacy, our organization is “left-leaning”. Some context is needed here. The League was founded by skilled lobbyists who were laser-focused on the issue of women’s suffrage. It took them 30 years to get the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment proposed in Congress, another 40 years to get it passed, and a feverish year of lobbying in state legislatures across the country to get it ratified by three-fourths of the states. You may be surprised to learn that in 1920 when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was finally ratified and the League of Women Voters was founded, it was the Republican Party that was aligned with the struggle for women’s voting rights. Most, if not all, of our founders were Republicans.

Like the League today, their lobbying efforts were issues-based. Our advocacy always focuses on issues, not political ideology. It’s important to remember that nonpartisan doesn’t mean neutral. It means policies derive from issues, not parties or candidates. The causes we lobby for or against are determined by our positions, which are adopted after our own in-depth study and research. Our policy positions represent the consensus of our members who can be affiliated with any political party or none.

In this current era, some may label our positions as “left-leaning”, but throughout our century-long history, we have been criticized as both too liberal and not liberal enough. We have not changed what we stand for, but it is undeniable that political parties have moved to more extreme positions.

With the exception of our board of directors, we have always encouraged our members to become engaged in the political process in whatever way they choose, even with candidates and parties. In these extremely polarized times, however, it is important to separate your personal views from League positions. If you are identified with the League, what you say may be associated with the organization.

In other words, we all need to tend to our own two silos. The good standing and respect the League has earned as a trusted source for nonpartisan information is at stake.

3/2023