THE DEMOCRATIC MERIT AND SUSTAINABILITY OF PARTICIPATORY PUBLIC INTEREST ASSOCIATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Maria Hoyt Cashin, M.P.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, DC
November 1, 2011
Democratic associations are cause for both hope and concern in contemporary America. Many groups that inspired active, bridging membership in the past to expand interest have disbanded or shrunk because of shifting social and political culture. In their place, the bulk of associations are hierarchical, without viable membership direction or participation, and cementing difference in practice. Within their company and operating in socially inclusive fashion to promote democratic process, the League of Women Voters appears assured for a “good citizen” award. Yet some critics might charge that by virtue of its association form, the League is simply another interest group and thus subject to scrutiny for self-serving purpose, fallible focus and manipulated process. This thesis considers the association’s origins, evolution, record, membership, and gradually declining numbers in the context of democratic theory to understand the League’s longevity and forecast through its prospects the character of self-rule through civic-focused associations.

The League will be judged unusually capable of rendering internal and external democratic benefits through its enhancement of personalized and national democratic process, enablement of individual participation, reliance on consensus and deliberation, and systematic pursuit of a public interest. The fact that it faces uncertain future while other sectarian, hierarchical and, in some cases, democracy-disabling groups are thriving is due at least in part to a deep public divide on whether citizen participation is a positive element in contemporary American democracy. To strengthen both the League’s future and the viability of democratic self-rule, Americans need to reinvigorate a national civic culture that
tolerates difference, regulates fair participation, and look forward through deliberative process toward an enlarged public interest that breeds both legitimate citizen assent and responsible policy and governance. That form of legitimacy amounts to a definition of the League's history and promise, underlining a judgment that it should be protected for some form of Camelot-like fate through closer appreciation of its contributions to democracy.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The fact that this thesis has moved forward over time to its current completion is testimony to the terrific support of mentor Dr. Thomas M. Kerch, who provided wise council on democratic theory, conducted careful analysis of my argument and gamely took on exploration of the Progressive Era, women’s suffrage and the League of Women Voters. I also extend deep gratitude to my husband Steve and children Oliver, Madeleine and Ben for encouraging me through extended months of research and writing. Rachel Shone kindly obtained membership data from the Daughters of the American Revolution and set up the graphs in Appendices 1 and 2. Further thanks are due to the faculty of the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Georgetown University, whose consistently superb courses have academically prepared me for the task of independent academic exploration. Finally and most importantly, members and staff of the League of Women Voters graciously welcomed engagement and discussion for which I am extremely appreciative; the resulting participation in social gatherings, annual meetings and private audiences was invaluable for fathoming the character and makeup of their justly celebrated deliberative operation.
# CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT ii

ABSTRACT iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 2. SETTING THE TERMS: DEMOCRACY AND ASSOCIATIONS IN AMERICA 7

CHAPTER 3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF A “CONGENIAL FORUM FOR CHANGE” 57

CHAPTER 4. RENDERING “CONGENIAL” CHANGE: CONSIDERING THE LEAGUE’S DEMOCRATIC IMPACT 91

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION 118


APPENDIX 2. CHANGE IN MEMBERSHIP OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL U.S. POPULATION 134

APPENDIX 3. AUTHOR’S RECORD OF INTERVIEW WITH NANCY TATE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS 135

BIBLIOGRAPHY 137
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Democratic associations are cause for both hope and concern in contemporary America. Within their company and operating, in Mark E. Warren's terms, as a socially inclusive, non-vested, easy exit organization dedicated to strengthening and expanding democracy, the League of Women Voters (henceforth termed the League) appears assured for a “good citizen group” award. Yet some critics might charge that by virtue of its association form, it is simply another interest group seeking success of its own self-serving, if public-spirited agenda. Has its public identity been incorrectly whitewashed as representing “the public interest” or pursuing “the common good?” On the other hand, is there substance to the claim that its process is so remarkable it should be emulated? This thesis will consider the organization’s origins, evolution, record and membership character in the context of democratic theory, concluding with an examination of the relevance of its declining numbers to forecast the character of self-rule through civic-focused associations.

Social capital theorist Robert D. Putnam recently pondered worrisome membership trends in associations and the accompanying decline in civic engagement and social capital. He made an important clarification about associations that are high in numbers yet operate essentially as “‘tertiary’ organizations . . . in which ‘membership is essentially an honorific rhetorical device for fundraising.” Examples of such groups include the National Rifleman’s Association and the American Civil Liberties Union, presenting within the top ten associations in terms of contributing members but providing minimal opportunity for


individual engagement; smaller groups of similar character are very numerous. It is these national trends toward mysterious, elite direction of public opinion and resources that make consideration of the League’s democratic potential particularly compelling while previously flourishing local chapters disband, professionalism grows, well-financed extremist voices influence the public agenda, and the diversity of American people retreats voluntarily or through compulsion from civic life. It may turn out that the League’s future is of interest far beyond its members, as prospects for deliberative self-rule decline.

American democratic institutions are built upon a guarded faith in a limited but developmental capacity of the country’s citizens to actualize freedom, equality and self-determination through the exercise of their democratic rights. If indeed this exercise has atrophied with misuse, as pre-2008 voting records and November 2010 election returns suggest, the question is whether the loss of freedom, equality and self-determination via those institutions can be far behind. The exercise of democratic rights is theoretically a deliberate activity, to be activated or bypassed by individual choice; in practice, obstructions abound to deter participation. The value to the body politic is process-driven yet dependent on available vehicles to link both passive and proactive citizens with the quality of their governmental representation and their perception of its legitimacy.

Associations have historically and theoretically been judged tremendously important to that civic exercise, for they appear to have encouraged, enabled and enlarged a widespread, repeated engagement that has contributed on a personal and societal level to achieving Alexis de Tocqueville’s celebrated “self-interest properly understood,”3 thereby countering narrow cultivation of individual concerns. Tocqueville observed in the first half of the 19th century that Americans tended to band together in association in order to guard

---

against individualistic tendency to retreat into personal worlds.⁴ Although the level of this “banding” has fluctuated throughout the nation's history, the society's affiliating proclivity has become integral to national self-image for contrasting reasons. Associations are seen variously as brakes to government growth through preserving private potential, social reengagement recipes for frustrated citizenry, expertise augmenters to enable informed participation, allied builders of a common interest to channel toward the public sphere, or propagandizing manipulators with cloudy legislative agendas. Warren cautions in *Democracy and Associations* that Americans should carefully consider associations' character and effect before embracing their personal or societal appeal. He notes that there has been little work on “what we should expect associations to do for democracies or why we should expect associations to carry out these democratic functions.”⁵

The League is an association that can be said to provide “democratic effects” through its operation linking individual citizens with the public sphere. In fact, it could be argued that the organization provides the “social substance of liberal-democratic procedures.”⁶ Over the course of its ninety-one year nonpartisan history, the League has committed itself to the motivation, enablement and education of both its uniquely engaged members and those of the nation at-large on active citizenship, study of contemporary issues, and advocacy to promote reformed democratic process and equitable participation. Answering Warren’s challenge to examine the impact and rationale for associations’ engagement with democracy, this thesis will argue that Warren’s “what,” cited in the previous paragraph, is determined by the League's “why.” A direct descendant of the

---

⁴ Ibid., as described within Vol. 2, part 2, chapter 2, “Of Individualism in Democracies.”


⁶ Ibid., 3.
seventy-two year suffragist battle to win votes for women, the League’s founders — reformers in the Progressive tradition — pledged to make that fight worthwhile by helping women and men vote freely, regularly and wisely to improve their country and pass on a legacy of cherished, hard-won and activated citizenship. Examination of the League will illustrate how, if one judges Warren’s equation to be important to democracy, it is particularly critical to consider how associations judged democratically beneficial act in practice and self-sustain in order to advance national social capital through their operation.

Different labels could apply to the League, each with their own literature. It could be termed a post-suffragist feminist organization dedicated to expanding the rights of women. With public confusion over the character and intent of the original Progressives, its linked agenda could be interpreted (inadequately) as durably liberal and partisan in purposive intent. Deliberative democrats may focus on its encouragement of public dialogue about contentious issues. Public servants may note its record in propelling the identification and encouragement of collective action to deal with wide-impact problems in a public interest fashion. Those compelled by Putnam’s lament on declining personal interaction to bridge civic divides will celebrate its active and theoretically diverse membership. Voting practitioners will focus on its provision of nonpartisan materials, events and advocacy that strengthen Americans’ ability to vote on election days. Finally, it could be judged an interest group like any other. In that light, it could be subject to abuse or praise, pairing its effectiveness on “public” agendas with the personal interests of its supporters. Attractive as some of these angles may be, the primary argument is that the League fits Warren’s socio-cultural definition of a civically virtuous, democracy-promoting association with a “distinct disposition that underwrite[s] democratic process, including a willingness to play by the
rules, attend to the common good, trust others, empathize with others, tolerate differences, respect rights, and deliberate and listen in good faith.”

The thesis appears in five chapters, including this Introduction as Chapter 1. The second chapter provides a theoretical frame that focuses on public interest groups, noting the origin of associations within civil society; their evolving relationship with government; diversification within the United States; member characteristics and motivation; typology; democratic merits; differential treatment; public interest criteria; tools and viruses for sustainability; and dwindling member trends.

The third chapter considers the League in an historical context, looking at its Suffrage origins and early struggles that would together impact its structural evolution; identification of purpose; development of distinctive style; dedication to grassroots process; character of membership; numerical success over time; functional operations; and analysis of survival prospects.

The fourth chapter focuses on standards of democratically beneficial public interest associations and examines in that light the League’s performance training people for democratic engagement, helping them experience democratic process, fostering education in citizenship, and encouraging the formation of “enlarged” public opinion. It further considers whether progressive advocacy compromises nonpartisanship or public interest representation and whether public problems do get solved in an enlarged fashion through the League’s efforts. Measuring the League’s democratic performance, particular attention is devoted to its dedication to respecting the democratic process and attendant jurisprudence; the extent to which it contributes toward social trust; limitations flowing from difference; consideration of the common good and gender advocacy; tension between institutional

---

7 Ibid., 149.
preservation and social impact; and the degree of compensation for democratic effects rendered.

The Conclusion contained in Chapter 5 returns to the question whether public interest membership groups like the League remain important and viable within contemporary America. Do they contribute toward shared values, and what are the stakes if particular ones disband? As particularized advocacy takes off without financial constraints, the voice of “public interest” is becoming faint and less effective, leading some to disagree that public participation, as sometimes “contracted out” through associations, is beneficial to democratic culture. Trends toward heightened partisanship and disengaged citizenry demonstrate serious implications for national democratic legitimacy, and suggest self-rule is dangerously off-track.

Consideration of these subjects is informed by reference to considerable literature on democratic theory; civil society in America; democracy and associations; American history; organizational theory; public administration; voluntarism, civic behavior and identity in the United States; chronology and analysis of the League of Women Voters; and sociological and political analysis of the League’s functions.
CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE TERMS: DEMOCRACY AND ASSOCIATIONS IN AMERICA

Theoretical context is essential for understanding the importance of a civic organization like the League of Women Voters. While the League is one of the most frequently analyzed American associations, its examination tends to break into narrow historical, sociological, organizational, political and behavioral forms. The League’s most useful lens may be through political theory, given the ninety-one years of testing ground for the long-lasting interrelationship between democracy and associations.

Mark E. Warren has reported a wide American consensus that “the virtues and viability of a democracy depend on the robustness of its associational life.”1 By tradition, such operation is purported to widen the experience of democracy beyond the voting booth into daily life, strengthening civic capacity in the process. Yet such belief rests on wavering theory. To clarify associations’ reputed and actual importance, Warren has advocated a theoretical focus on what society expects associations to contribute toward healthy democracy as well as examination of their motivation to do so.2 He has further advocated an examination of how associations should operate so as to breed “democratic associational ecologies” that generate these democratic effects.3

While the U.S. Constitution is silent beyond Amendment I, requiring Congress to “make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech . . . or the right of people peaceably to assemble,” Americans have consistently linked associations with their experience of

---

2 Ibid., 4.
3 Ibid., 206.
democracy, but disagreed on their merits and identity. Do associations have a positive role to play? They certainly “excel at capturing the intensity of interest of a fragmented public,” interceding Tocqueville-style to keep government accountable and the citizenry alert. In the process, they are reputed to provide a “learning school for democracy” to the extent they socialize their members into democratic value patterns.

Over time, theorists have disagreed on associations’ roles in civil society. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that they are a sector divorced from public concerns and government operation. Highly complex and mutually dependent

4 “Academically associations (interest groups) are very much in vogue, albeit often with snazzy new neologism – (new social movement organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, etc.). As Grant (2002: 5) points out, the unquestioning acceptance of the (newly fashionable) term ‘civil society’ conjoined with the new intellectual associations of the term, has lead to a positive bestowal of legitimacy on what were once seen as interest groups. The democratic credentials of associations in the interest group guise were seen as deficient. However, a group in civil society robes appears more (normatively) wholesome and attractive.” Grant Jordan and William A. Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 193.

5 Ibid., 7. Italics added.


8 Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at associations’ social glue that mixed reciprocal democratic spirit and stability. John Dewey perceived their important role in the formation of publicly spirited political opinion. Sidney Verba, Gabriel Almond and Nancy Rosenblum believed them central to breeding democratic morality and behavior. Social capitalists considered them essential to fostering the social capital essential for prosperity and effective governance. Ronald Reagan envisioned their capability to contain social service delivery within civil society. Warren proceeded to combine approaches, judging associations to be creators and anchors of vital political norms while constructing and delivering interest.

9 Reams of academic material explore the connections between civil society and associations that are generally beyond the scope of this thesis. Three groupings shed helpful light through focusing on (1) bonding and bridging via Tocqueville and the communitarians; (2) breeding morality and trust via Sidney Verba, Robert D. Putnam and Nancy Rosenblum; and (3) developing human capacity via Aristotle, Putnam (yet again), John Dewey and Benjamin Barber.
relationships are intrinsic to the twenty-first century on all levels. As these intertwined connections have developed, so too has the diversity within associations themselves.\(^{10}\)

Citizenship ideals that drive civic associations are also shifting. Judith Shklar has focused on energetic citizenship as a right and a necessity that holds literal value to generate “a demand for inclusion in the polity, an effort to break down barriers to recognition . . .”\(^{11}\) Associations hold potential to activate a representative engagement important to pluralistic democracy, yet they also can exclude large populations.\(^{12}\)

Do citizens have the competence or attention for the job? Negative responses flourish.\(^{13}\) John Dewey fundamentally disagreed with these dismissive expectations,

\(^{10}\) Mark E. Warren, “The Political Role of Non-profits in a Democracy,” *Society* 40, no. 4 (May/June 2003): 48, 51. Some have members and serve particular interests; others have none, and seek public cause. Most are “non-profits” in their financial structure, yet some compensate lucratively and pursue financial gain. Some are thriving; others are struggling or have already shrunk beyond return. Supposedly independent, the combined independent sector is riddled with government contracts.


\(^{12}\) Theorists who take interest in associations frequently believe they can energize citizenship. But Barber and Shklar have noted a paradox arising from America’s unforgiving work ethic amidst a declining economy. Volunteerism and civic actions are disregarded because of a general disdain for “leisured” time required to enact self-rule. They have concluded that good civic behavior — association membership included — should be literally rewarded. Enhanced esteem for public citizenship has proved an obvious but contentious path because of perceived redistributive implications, and has not made obvious headway.

drawing from Aristotle a positive developmental vision of human potential. He promoted the concept of "social intelligence" as the public's potential to grapple with social ills through learned capacity and deliberative vehicles that spurred independent opinion-formation.14 Dewey's views are fundamental to positive assessment of civic associations and their optimistic expectations of member contributions.15 Moderating both dismissive and heightened views of citizen capacity, Nancy Rosenblum has noted associations' prosaic potential to encourage equal-regarding interpersonal relations and a carefully applied “ability to perceive and object to injustice”16 irrespective of civic application. Other theorists argue that associations encourage mental laziness that ill-serves public judgment.17 Amidst

---


15 Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, Why Deliberative Democracy? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); David Held, Models of Democracy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 232; and Frohlich and Oppenheimer, “Values, Policies, and Citizen Competence,” 162-183. Amy Gutman, Dennis Thompson and Claus Offe developed this theme, arguing that people are capable of mutually reciprocal judgment that enables deliberative democracy, deriving rationally from intellectual engagement that is “fact-regarding,” “future-regarding” and other-regarding” in pursuit of solutions to collective problems. Frohlich and Oppenheimer argued that competence can be structurally encouraged if governmental institutions enable enhanced participation.


17 Samuel L. Popkin and Michael A. Dimock, “Political Knowledge and Citizen Competence,” in Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions, ed. Steven L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 117; and Roger Wachbroit, “The Changing Role of Expertise in Public Deliberation,” in Civil Society, Democracy and Civic Renewal, ed. Robert K. Fullenwider (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 356-57. Popkin and Dimock judged it is acceptable for people to be imperfectly versed because they use associations for “information shortcuts” and “political cues” with basic contextual knowledge. Wachbroit cautioned that voluntary associations might seek to “enlarge” and “educate” the public's limited expertise but may not have deserved their trust, since “expert” facts were fallible and frequently partisan-driven.
this long-brewing theoretical tension between rule of the empowered and rule of the captive is a history full of disenfranchisement because of supposed incompetence.¹⁸

What types of values and virtues are on display? Students of American government recognize the value in distrust and virtue of resistance within and beyond the federal government.¹⁹ History provides memorable examples of civil society and government gone wrong, and distrust can at times be a virtue. Participation can be manipulated for harmful purposes, and most judge it wise to look carefully at its character and results before celebrating upswings in citizen engagement.²⁰

Yet the spirit of democratic opportunity behind individual achievement draws from the Aristotelian valuation of human development, its yin yang of citizen engagement and a rationale for establishing trust. Private behavior can translate to publicly-spirited civics “first because it benefits [the citizen] and secondly because it is in part his own work.”²¹

But the deep strain between distrust and trust, made worse through contemporary cultural and economic pluralism, remains highly relevant to the character and democratic impact of associations. Benjamin Barber mourned the settlement on legalistic process that permits the negotiation within value impasse. While such a circumscribed frame allows for

¹⁸ Marion Smiley, “Democratic Citizenship: A Question of Competence?” in Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions, ed. Steven L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 372-377. Smiley has contended that the “language of competence is inherently antidemocratic” and that there is no such thing as bias-free civic education.


complexity and prevents general derailing of all public agenda, observers of associations’ conflicted realm note that it can come at the expense of a shared valuation of citizenship, “public” sphere and expanded awareness of “us.”

America is also conflicted regarding people’s tendency to dally with interest groups, associations thick in their midst. Given inevitable conflict, Robert Dahl argued that “groups are not a problem for democracy, they are its essence.” Yet while process makes such contestation fair in theory, the unorganized and disengaged need most help. Some theorists assert distinctions should be made to evaluate the character and inclusiveness of individual action through groups. Warren noted seven civic virtues that would make such dalliance more democratically palatable.” These elements of a positive “social ecology of associations” provide a high bar that flickers rarely in American history.

Getting real: An historical refresher on associations’ impact in the U.S.

Associations’ fortunes charge a highly partisan history. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Theda Skocpol found widespread historical evidence of deliberate organization by charismatic leaders to address shared concerns in response to an “opportunity structure” provided since independence by the elongating national government reach and its federal bones. Progressive social movement associations expanded parameters of government

---


24 “A willingness to play by the rules; attuning to the common good; trusting others; empathizing with others; tolerating differences; respecting rights; and deliberating in good faith.” Warren, *Democracy and Association*, 149.


26 Theda Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy,” *Social Science History* (Winter 1997): 472. See also Theda Skocpol, Marshall Ganz and Ziad Munson,
concern into family issues like child welfare, contraception, and temperance while also igniting major change on abolition and extension of suffrage. Conservatives later applied the same associational tool to undo that enlargement, proposing further that the associational allies of destruction could stand in to provide “functional substitutes” for government. In this sense, Benjamin Barber’s revival of Aristotelian-Tocquevillian notions of active associational citizenship ignites yet another partisan round in the associational soap opera. Yet Barber’s arguments that civic associations’ fortunes will help determine those of democracy are disturbing amidst evidence of the former’s decline.

Unfortunately the public, distrusting government to do the job well, lines up particularized associations to deliver the message. Social capital’s grease in contemporary form is becoming toxic. To understand the contemporary crisis in Tocqueville’s cherished associations due to their increasing professionalization, partisanship and disappearing membership, association theorists highlight the Progressive Era that enlivened philosophy, politics and the social sciences from the turn of the 20th century to the middle of the

---


27 Hodgkinson and Foley, The Civil Society Reader, xviii, xxi.

28 Benjamin Barber, Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age (Berkeley: University of California Press), 261.

29 Mark E. Warren, ed., Democracy and Trust (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3, 355; and Robert E. Lane, “The Joyless Polity: Contributions of Democratic Processes to Ill-Being,” in Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions, ed. Steven L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 351-2, 363. Warren noted an ongoing paradox: American political institutions were formed to enable the performance of the people’s institutionally expressed will, yet the inherent societal distrust insured associations would likely try to disable any attempt to succeed. Lane commented that associations were frequently oppositional to government because their members considered its actions malevolent.
Its unifying call to reform challenged public inability to narrow wild discrepancies in income and power issuing from technological profiteering, competing political machines, diverse waves of impoverished immigrants, and widespread presumption of government corruption by a cynical, self-interested but frustrated populace.

The Progressives were an ideologically diverse group largely reflecting the interests of the middle class, disdainful of abuse and disturbed by poverty. They were convinced the problems arose from powerful economic changes, lagging laws, and latent civic capacity. Frequently evangelistic yet biased, they reflected the mores of their time. Their 1924 campaign platform combined pragmatism and idealism in a manner that fueled massive change and still inspires cutting edge reform in spite of revisionist criticism.31

The Progressive movement was born from associations and, it could be argued, returned there to stay. Capable leaders launched campaigns to start public interest groups such as the League of Women Voters, the National Consumer’s League and the American Civil Liberties Union. Each aimed to connect civically concerned citizens with newly empowered government to deliberatively solve problems of principle like inequality, fair play and equal rights in “the public interest.” Their leaders considered associations essential


31 Levine, The New Progressive Era, 72. Good government and anti-corruption might strengthen the rules and unseat city bosses threatened by reform. Fair redistribution might avert Bolshevik-era social revolution. Newly developed management science might improve the delivery of expanding public service. Extensions of popular sovereignty might give the unpredictable populace better chance to advocate in their true interest. Mutability could clarify the relative character of truth, even in regard to the Constitution. Political equality might protect these changes through launching a whole new voting population from previously excluded ranks. Deliberation could educate the newly enabled populace to understand and solve the complex public challenges unresolvable through standard competition.
for addressing the critical relation between good citizenship and political reform.\textsuperscript{32} From the start, these Twentieth Century public interest groups faced partisan, bonded and angry opposition, threatened by unwelcome forms of change.

While they could differ wildly, few association leaders could argue that national politics had ever been irrelevant to their aspirations. By Tocqueville’s era, associations and all levels of government achieved a mutual dependency enabled by the U.S. postal service, spreading suffrage, evangelistic revivals and the federal “opportunity structure” that elicited program response.\textsuperscript{33} While many of these associations were fraternal and bonding in character, a growing number were bridging social movements that sought value-laden change.

Many of the early Nineteenth Century historical products of this interdependence have been judged kindly by history. The American Anti-Slavery Society worked with other abolitionist associations to relentlessly push for emancipation of American-based slaves. The National American Women’s Suffrage Association was eventually rewarded for its determined bridging campaign for women’s suffrage. Others are unevenly cherished, like the American Temperance Society, judged by Americans as too invasive and severe, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, welcoming new Irish immigrants into segmented yet essential haven.

The commonly assumed federation structure flourished from 1800 to 1950, providing members with identity, companionship, shared values, expanded skills, outward concern, and an integrative capability that weathered an increasingly mobile society. Women’s rise to prominence through church and community groups led to otherwise

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 23-25, 71.

\textsuperscript{33} Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 460.
unavailable skill development and influenced associations’ energetic moral agenda. These properties positioned associations as “vital agents of democratic revitalization in American history,” galvanizing a level of socially concerned engagement that inspired the Progressives. But reforming efforts did not always proceed as planned. Progressive public interest associations received criticism in the 1920s that the government they enabled produced a soulless, scientific and elitist management of society and disabled local moral capacity. Intending redistribution, association-led reforms tended to produce regulation instead, with few appreciating its too-human implementation.

By 2011, the association world has become unrecognizable from the past chapters of bonding, bridging and righteous indignation. As local identity and national optimism became overwhelmed by world wars, economic distress and dislocation, it had seemed in the 1950s that long-standing groups would still withstand and evolve through pressures as they had done before. But cultural, legal and political change wrought by the 1960’s civil rights movement rapidly de-legitimated the traditional motivations to join. The reputations of stalwart chapter-based membership associations like the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC) were durably associated with discriminatory practices. Clout and membership evaporated as a result. Most young people of the 1960s and 1970s chose not to join associations considered tainted and passé, seeking integrating and contemporary currency. Military support groups, which epitomized the patriotic fervor so common to

---


37 Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 139, 157, 180, 469.
association ritual, lost their bridging allure and created generational conflict. These widespread rejections "dissolved much of the moral glue that enabled cross-class associations to flourish, particularly among men."\textsuperscript{38} Changing gender rights further reduced members through redirecting highly educated women toward work. Few gender-specific groups survived because of equal rights legislation, though ethnic groups continued to thrive.

The subsequent decades have been volatile. A few longstanding associations proved adept at extreme crusading about retirement benefits, teenage fatalities, birth control and guns via direct mail and the web. Like other cocky new players, they have tended to be well-versed in the "business of building membership,"\textsuperscript{39} and have a vested, specific message that assists their viable competition on a corporate-equivalent playing field, interpersonal bridging potential discarded to the winds.\textsuperscript{40}

These groups have joined a larger advocacy “explosion” to meet a changed “opportunity structure” of expanded bureaucracy and permissive election regulations. The new “march on Washington” arrives with tools ranging from clipboard-carrying students, direct mail missives, public relations specialists, computer wizards, grassroots phone-bankers and lawyers.\textsuperscript{41} Idealistic organizational entrepreneurs continue to operate, but most choose to avoid the developmental bottom-up engagement so fundamental to “schools of democracy.” Regardless of political affiliation, Skocpol has asserted that the reduction in participatory associations has “diminished democracy” through reorientation of huge civic

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 185.

\textsuperscript{39} Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 87.

\textsuperscript{40} Skocpol, Diminished Democracy, 178.

\textsuperscript{41} Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 16.
resources away from hard-won cooperative identities, values and aims.\textsuperscript{42} Public-oriented membership groups qualify as relics. \textsuperscript{43} Skocpol has pointed out that fast-moving shifts in leadership demands, task and organization complexities, technology requirements and digitally linked-in supporters have a profound impact on which organizations will thrive and influence public decisions.\textsuperscript{44} More importantly, such competition exacerbates existing inequalities through robbing those under-equipped of equivalent voice.

Who still volunteers in this climate? Many working professionals will either send a donation or remain unaffiliated, offering occasional self-rewarding hours to social service agencies, yet missing out on the moral development from deliberate bridging engagement. But others still show for the Kiwanis’ social hour. Conducting research on recent joining patterns in Massachusetts, Skocpol found that while affluent, educated Americans left fraternal and civic organizations in a post-1960s rush, less-educated, military-aspiring Americans stayed.\textsuperscript{45} Their loyalty generates flag-carrying celebration of citizenship in membership associations like the 4-H Club and the American Legion, yet lacks the bridging benefits of previous eras. A chasm has developed between (1) well-heeled supporters and leaders of nonprofit advocacy organizations, sharing common lifestyles regardless of view, and (2) those patriotic upstanding Americans they’re ostensibly serving. Careful

\textsuperscript{42} Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 158-161.

\textsuperscript{43} “Summary statistics about 3,000 social welfare and public affairs organizations founded in the 1960s – 1980s show that close to half indicate no ‘members’ at all, and another quarter claim fewer than 1,000 ‘members’ . . . . To borrow the colorful phrase of my colleague and fellow researcher Marshall Ganz, the vast majority of recently founded civic associations are ‘bodyless heads.’” Ibid., 162-63.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 191, 218-222.
consideration of “protest businesses” does reveal predominant middle-class orientation, with the less educated and more isolated opting for “hokey” membership.

An argument can be made that this dangerous cycle, in full Tea-Party show-down, is still correctable through Sidney Verba’s positively assessed public interest groups, which have been riding a powerful wave of their own since the 1970s. Their pragmatic aims provide a version of the 1924 Progressive Party platform in contemporary action, combatting collective action problems through measures like public journalism, civil investing, social unionism, service learning, civic environmentalism, study circles and deliberative polling. While public interest association executives can be as integrated into the policy process as sectarian colleagues, their more engaged membership tends to be unusually bridging in income, education and views. But association theorists are expressing concern that membership-based chapter federations may not be up to speed with the nimble protest business players to competitively play the current game.

Association typology

David Knoke presented “a minimal definition” of an association as “a formally organized named group, most of whose members – whether persons or organizations – are

46 Official pursuit of these generally-termed “good government” aims found a zenith during the Clinton Administration; they are still carried as policy within that of President Obama.

47 Levine, The New Progressive Era, xiii, 54-57; and Skocpol, Diminished Democracy, 138. Founded in 1973, Common Cause is a classic example of the new round of “good government” public interest groups and is widely esteemed for its accomplishments. Environmental groups have also weathered the storm, blending “protest business” and “expressive” elements to agilely mobilize their membership, defeating on occasion considerable odds.

48 Anne Skorkjaer Binderkrantz, “Membership Recruitment and Internal Democracy in Interest Groups: Do Group-Member Relations Vary Between Group Types?” West European Politics 32, no. 3 (May 2009): 657-678; and Skocpol, Diminished Democracy, 201-202, 220.
not financially recompensed for their participation.”

If only it were so simple. The categorization of associations is very challenging, in part because of loose terminology.

A reasonable requirement would be the presence of members. Warren noted that as of 1995, 576,133 tax-exempt membership organizations were in existence, not including religious congregations. But what makes for membership? Certainly some will draw very active people but others may attract those inclined to stay away. Are both fine ways to be a member? Does it count to simply write the check or must one attend regularly in person and adhere to rules, activity expectations and shaped norms? How many members make for a viable ride? Can the simple presence of members mask an identity not driven by public participation? These questions are not answered easily.

Must an association be small and local? Tocqueville concluded so, yet Skocpol later disagreed. While the function and scale of associations vary widely, the more telling detail is how they structure to accommodate members. Some will have a horizontal self-governing management style reliant on member volunteerism. Others will assume professionalized hierarchical organization yet rely on members for their voice and direction. Warren has argued that an organization’s structure will unveil its purpose, with the first developing its members’ abilities and the second streamlining for advocacy.

Should an association bridge or bond? Certainly, a range of associations exist that fuel polarization rather than social capital. Jason Kaufman considered the historical record of U.S. associations to incline toward exclusionary, nativist, racist, and incendiary character,

49 Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 2.

50 Warren, Democracy and Association, 10.

51 Ibid., 94.
permeating civil society and blocking progressive change. Yet other associations bridged class through fraternal orientation, drawing to common purpose (if imperfectly in racially classified society) people who would otherwise have stayed separate.

Associations will vary in generalized to specific aims and vested to transformative stance. E.E. Schattschneider provided the dividing line:

Public interest organizations are generally defined by some end or principle. Anyone who agrees with their credo can join, although membership may require a moderate fee . . . . Organizations that so readily admit members usually interpret their ends in general terms . . . . Not everyone agrees with their specific agendas, but their aspirations are framed in (formally) universal language . . . . By contrast, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) permits only industrial corporations to join. What defines the NAM is not a principle or end, but rather an identity and the interests that follow from it.

Many public interest organizations are less committed to the status quo than particularized groups. These independent “social movement” groups represented one third of all associations operating from 1776 to 1955.

Are associations just “interest groups in civil society robes?” David B. Truman defined an interest group to be “‘any group that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes makes certain claims upon other groups in society for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by their shared attitudes.’” For an individual-based membership association to be included, it would seek to influence policy but not attempt to govern. Few theorists would argue advocacy is

52 Kaufman, For the Common Good, viii.

53 Barber, A Place for Us, 21. Barber provided the reference to E.E. Schattschneider’s 1960 thesis.


55 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 193.

necessarily inappropriate. Jordan and Maloney posited “pure” membership-based interest group as achievable, made beneficial through finite nature, accountability, and production of democratic norms and civic incentives among members and extended populace. But “ideal” interest groups draw from a small member-driven supply. In 1990, for example, *American lobbying groups with members accounted for 22.8% of total registered lobbying organizations. An earlier count found 70% of citizen lobbying groups lacking members.*

Associations vary regarding the character of entry. Examples like church groups or unions will not be voluntary for everyone. To be democratically beneficial to the member, joining needs to be a matter of individual choice. But few decisions will be made in isolation, and will largely be affected by culture, community and circumstance.

At first glance, one would expect easy categorization of associations within a non-profit heading. But this turns out to muddy the definition rather than to hone it. Featuring all organizations not termed profit or government-driven, the non-profit sector has grown huge, accounting for 7% of the nation’s gross domestic product. *It is extremely diverse and largely without members, featuring intimate fraternal groups and counseling circles along with lobbying tigers and nation-wide service-providers. The sector defies adequate public accountability in both its finances and public impact. In 2008, the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) noted there were almost 1.57 million non-profits getting tax-exempt benefits in the United States. These benefits were not distributed according to a civic measuring stick.* Funding doesn’t clarify the picture, except to indicate that those

---

57 Ibid., 28-30.

58 Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 132-151.

nonprofits without members often gather massive sums of money from anonymous donors that make civic poverty leagues look poorer than their target audience.\textsuperscript{60} Nor does function, since associations, like non-profits in general, frequently deliver public services in addition to other tasks.

An additional way to categorize associations is by their longevity, influence and numbers. Historical and cultural shifts have blasted Tocqueville’s promised land, decimating the fraternal groups so popular from the Eighteenth Century through the Second World War. As the 1950’s advanced, the largest associations were still drawn from sundry women’s clubs, the American Legion and the YMCA. But the stable trend overturned in the following decades, with the august General Federation of Women’s Clubs declining by 83.1% from 1955-1995, followed by the Masons, who lost 69.8% during the same period.\textsuperscript{61}

Which associations are dominant at the present? Of the ten largest public charities in 2008, only one was a generalized interest membership organization, the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation, Inc. with assets of $190,892,731 and lengthy member roster. The others were sectarian in orientation and without membership for greater flexibility in fundraising, lobbying and organization.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. Those deemed charities by NCCS received 75% of their 2008 funding from individuals, 13% from foundations, 7% in bequests and corporations.

\textsuperscript{61} Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 131, 154-155.

\textsuperscript{62} National Center for Charitable Statistics, "National Center for Charitable Statistics: Frequently Asked Questions," http://nccs.urban.org/FAQ (accessed 3/9/11); and League of Women Voters, "Creating a More Perfect Union: League of Women Voters 2007-2008 Annual Report" (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters report, 2009). The other nonprofits are the American Jewish Committee (NY), a membership organization with nominal entrance fees and opportunities to participate; the Anti-Defamation League Foundation; the NRA Foundation Inc., which does not invite membership but encourages donations while the NRA parent association does seek membership at a
Should there be differential treatment?

Should there be a civic measuring stick for tax benefits and other forms of incentives or penalties? For what purpose? If liberalist human development through free plurality of groups is the aim, perhaps not. But if the public resolves to encourage particular democratic habits while discouraging others, then perhaps yes. Examining how associations’ democratic ecology impacts the public realm will help make the call.

What types of state intervention are under consideration? Warren recorded six different forms: according freedom to associations and protecting them by law (though not formally within the Constitution); intervening through regulation, subsidies and income supports; affecting their subsistence through tax exemption or penalty; public-private partnerships; and equalizing the playing field.63

Regulation judgments are governed by philosophy, law and practical practice. Nancy Rosenblum has considered associations to present a poor theoretical case for widespread regulation: “The moral uses of pluralism militate for expansive freedom of association and against a strategy of deliberately legislating schools of virtue by government inducements or legally mandated congruence.” While illiberal practice has thrived, “demands for congruence [were] . . . psychologically naïve and politically misguided.” Channeling Darwin, Rosenblum believed that the “dynamic of associations . . . [forming], joining, schism and disassociation are as much a part of freedom of association as the solidity of identification

---

63 Warren, Democracy and Association, 220-221.
and belonging.” Government alliance with one over others would, she believed, be disastrous and unsustainable. Individual choice among a “dense array” countered most associations’ danger or influence. Minimizing regulation would enable democratic culture through helping individuals engage difference and develop judgment to counter internal problems through resignation, more penalizing than regulation.

While Rosenblum’s emphasis on freedom to associate is compelling to Americans, there are reasons to reserve blanket application and support regulation. The current associational climate in which wolves compete with lambs for attention, resources and results from a seemingly clueless polity leads to highly uneven promotion of norms, deliberation, and resource access traditionally attributed to associations. Critics challenge Putnam’s dirge to receding membership by charging there are too many associations, particularly of sectarian character. Some associations act as highly effective lobbying limbs of business. Others supplement their private dues with government grants for delivery of devolved public services. Given the sharing of functions and funding among government, associations and the larger non-profit world, energetic monitoring is needed to anticipate associations’ self-interest, insure accountability, and seek equitable impact.

---


66 Rosenblum, Membership and Morals, 352.


Warren has posed those associations meriting regulation as ones with power to exclude or discriminate in the distribution of scarce or public resources, damaging equal representation in the process.70 Rosenblum herself advocated regulation for those associations that create or control citizen competence though “proponents rarely recommend enforcing congruence all the way down.”71 Levine believed regulations merited strengthening across the board to insure those associations most beneficial to democracy would earn favorable treatment.72

What Makes an Association Democratically Beneficial?

Political theorists have weighed associations’ democratic potential through competing political orientations. Liberals value associations’ ability to promote interest; communitarians seek their moral solidarity; and deliberative pluralists encourage their civic invitation. All conclude that some associations are more beneficial than others, and that most only partly embody the ideal. These varied theoretical discussions also tend to agree that the most promising associations are those dying in the people’s midst.

One group of democratic benefits draws from associations’ unique ability to effect self-rule through helping citizens train and activate themselves as empowered participants. Tocqueville’s famed school for democracy is real for those putting in volunteer time as members.73 These benefits draw from the readiness to energetically join, the schooling in procedure and substance, and the mobilization that expands their engaged numbers.74

---

70 Warren, Democracy and Association, 26, 29.


73 Hooghe, “Voluntary Associations and Socialization,” 569.

74 For description of these points, see Barber, Strong Democracy, 219; and Warren, Democracy and Association, 205.
A second clustering of democratic benefits comes from associations’ combative self-interested inclinations. Jordan and Maloney suggested their primary impact was “to increase the level of contestation over policy.” But is that a bad thing? Maloney asserted, “self-interest is far from a pathology. If all citizens were motivated solely by regard for others, then it would be likely that their appetite for involvement would quickly evaporate.” Moreover, some view self-interest as public defense.

A third grouping of benefits is more conditional, positing that associations are democratically beneficial to the extent they improve the “public sphere” through developing quality dialogue between the government and its citizens. Such dialogue enables the formation of informed individual opinion, and enhances legitimacy through engaging citizens in the process of policy. To that end, associations accept fair rules of procedure, contribute to mutually justifiable debates and legitimately accepted outcomes, and assist in expanding the voices of those affected by public action. Such deliberative merit draws from acceptance of legal and ethical codes, full representation of difference, and accountability for methods, aims and selection of those who participate.

75 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 170.


77 It is said to prevent insidious majoritarians from “willing asleep our apprehension of discord.” Hamilton, “Federalist 6,” The Federalist Papers, 33.


79 Ibid., 61, 92; Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 236.

A fourth category refers to associations' frequent orientation toward issues of collective concern. Through incentives, ideals and drive, they hold the potential to resolve thorny public issues through collective action. John Dewey and Carmen Sirianni have referred to this prospect as “social learning.” Such action permits practical realization of a normative public good unachievable individually or without widespread support.81

A fifth benefit from associations draws from their interpersonal dynamic, which brings people together to “experience pluralism.”82 This associational encounter transforms judgment toward reciprocal “self-interest properly understood,”83 improving opinion quality and the resulting representation. It also fundamentally shapes individual moral development in an “expressive” fashion84 through shaping disposition toward other people, encouraging habits of equality and volunteerism in daily life.

A sixth benefit issues from associations’ wide and largely unregulated array. Through negative liberty, “forming, joining, splitting and leaving associations are as personally significant as communitarian 'belonging'; indeed, they are a prelude to it.”85 The key to this benefit is unhampered selection. Jordan and Maloney have noted “the nature of the democratic choice is in the support itself . . . . Put bluntly, the Schumpeterian democratic choice is between groups. If you do not like the group, do not join it.”86 Freedom to leave if

81 Warren, Democracy and Association, 147.
83 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 525.
84 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 48. The authors provide the following definition: “Expressive actions are values of a person or group rather than instrumentally pursuing interests or values . . . . [B]enefits are derived from the expression itself . . . .”
86 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 163.
personal and associational goals diverge is an important democratic benefit. But for those organizations that promote cooperative ethical and negotiating structure, discord can also provide the choice to stay and mediate. In the process, Rosenblum has concluded members will learn habits of tolerance, self-discipline and justice.87

A seventh benefit of associations is their powerful ability to equalize opportunity to both participate and be heard.88 The partisan-splintered crowd of groups widens means and reasons for engagement to taste and circumstance, in the process improving the potential representation of wider groups of people than would be the case with voter rolls alone. Associations have historically amplified voice for those without political clout, “representing difference” with a moral force unavailable to other sectors.89

An eighth benefit of associations comes from their contribution to social capital and trust so important for resolving issues at any level. Associations help create such trust through bringing different types of people together for common purpose, thereby creating the social glue necessary to unite a diverse nation. Such bridging potential has resided by degree in fraternal groups throughout American history, with active civic membership across class. An engaged populace helps ensure accountability as well as trust, enabling both prosperity and progressive legislation.90

---

87 Rosenblum, Membership and Morals, 352-353.


89 Warren, Democracy and Association, 171.

A ninth benefit can come from associations’ internal structure to the extent they operate democratically and encourage valid member contribution to means and goals. Such groups empower their members with a burgeoning sense of efficacy and legitimately represent their views. If structure enables tiered engagement facilitating local as well as national focus, associations improve detailed attention to community and regional needs.

The tenth benefit of associations relates to Tocqueville’s belief that democratic countries required shared interests and values — habits of the heart — to enable the reciprocal judgment to help democracy survive and prosper. Such commonality, he submitted, issued from cultural heritage and enabled the voluntary associations bonding the country together. While the concept of homogenous, culturally-derived values has become more problematic in pluralistic contemporary society, at a minimum citizenship itself can only have meaning if a shared valuing of its rights and obligations can be made more available to the general population. Civic associations are frequently oriented to this purpose, holding a special democratic potential.

Are there negative democratic effects of associations? Absolutely. For each of the above there is evidence that associations can disable deliberation, fair representation, common interests, and political efficacy to solve collective issues. These malignant seeds breed from the shifting character and prospect for meaningful membership, confusion of means versus ends in a professionalized sector culture, illiberal trends in associations and

91 Maloney, “Interest Groups and Social Capital,” 316.


93 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 192-95, 287.
civil society, partisanship dominance over public interest, and the extraordinary inequalities in contemporary America. Such arguments can produce volumes.  

This thesis sets out to counter negativist fatalism with a prognosis that democratically beneficial associations can have a national future if they can preserve active membership. To make that argument, civic associations — with the League of Women Voters in particular — will be judged by their ability to thrive while measuring up to the ten associational virtues listed above.

What makes one aim more public than another?

Associations tend to make normative claims to wide-ranging solutions that will reorient a temporarily misguided compass toward the country's true values. Americans have traditionally been both leery and susceptible. Jordan and Maloney have pointed out that "most groups could construct a plausible argument . . . they are acting on behalf of a wider community or that the wider community will benefit from the changes, or goods and benefits they seek." Yet many jaded practitioners concede some aims are more public than others. Cynical James Madison placed his hope for improved interest in the filtering process

---


95 Hamilton, “Federalist 6,” The Federalist Papers, 28; Maloney, “Interest Groups and Social Capital,” 309; and Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 20. Hamilton deemed public reasoning as camouflage for powerful private interests dangling the “pretext of some public motive” to lull gullible voters into false confidence. Maloney asserted their inevitable subjectivity. He noted D.S. Cupps’ argument that virtuous-appearing advocates of “public purpose” were actually advancing their own middle and upper middle class interests.

96 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 24.
of delegated authority toward educated worthy gentlemen.\textsuperscript{97} Liberals hope to aggregate through healthy competition a transformed end that serves as many as possible while minimizing abuse of those seeking alternative paths.\textsuperscript{98} Yet aggregation is increasingly viewed inadequate, unachievable and immoral amidst interdependent issues that require wider consideration of impact.

Unfortunately, public-oriented aims addressing that interdependence are frequently ill-matched against disproportionately equipped private interests. Greater public will exists to identify public ills than the solutions that might reduce them.\textsuperscript{99} The “balkanization of public opinion” that issues from contemporary identity politics and non-blending ethnicities makes it difficult to be “public-regarding” of those appearing to hold different values.\textsuperscript{100} Given diversity, many associations may agree on a common goal but have very different ways to get there.\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, those groups claiming a purified vision frequently lack a burning bush to prove they hold the authorized version. Voluntary

\textsuperscript{97} Madison, “Federalist 10,” \textit{The Federalist Papers}, 59.

\textsuperscript{98} Hodgkinson and Foley, \textit{The Civil Society Reader}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{99} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 104. The authors contend the national hunger for public negatives creates an “externality [of] increasing alienation . . . Opponents are portrayed as ‘enemies’ who want to destroy the values that the recipient of the mail [is] supposed to hold dear.”


associations stand apart and without formal authority from government, home and the workplace. They are reasonably open to criticism on that basis as they claim high ground.102

Perhaps the greatest challenge comes from public economics, which identifies a public good as “a good or service from whose consumption no group member can be excluded regardless of the level of an individual’s contribution toward the provision of that good.”103 Mancur Olson has argued that public goods like clean water exist (in fact the whole field was created to address them) but defy collective action because of rational free-riding behavior. Paying an individual price to achieve a collective goal exceeds the likely personal benefit. From an economist’s standpoint, it is irrational to seek a public aim unless compensated with hefty incentives or penalties.104 Government is in the “business” of providing public goods for that reason, with penalties of public dissatisfaction abounding.

Challenges granted, the process of figuring out methods to overcome collective problems is not a new project.105 After all, public goods and needs activate revolution as well as bureaucracy, underscoring quality of life and citizenship. Americans fiercely cherish general public goods like free speech, equal opportunity and dignity. Their pursuit provides bases for both government and associations even if their realization gets lost in the process.

How do such public aims and goods get addressed? Most constructively, they are achieved through fair deliberative process and the rule of law. The governmental structure

---


103 Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 5.


105 Ibid., 33. Olson described therein David Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature. The 1749 work addressed the challenges of caretaking common grazing ground. Considerable scholarship has been devoted to find means that overcome disincentives to public action on public problems.
thus empowered teams with a responsibly engaged public power to build collective action vehicles that meet the deliberative standards of mutual justifiability, accuracy and sustainability.\textsuperscript{106} There is, of course, a huge gap between this theoretical ideal and political reality, and the achievement of public goods remains very difficult. Successful passage of enabling legislation and protection of resulting regulations often require advocacy through Schattschneider’s public interest associations, well versed at remaining on high minded script.

Fortunately, these public interest groups are empowered by a particular breed of members. Contrary to Mancur Olson’s belief that such membership was irrational, public interest groups have surged since 1970 with members motivated by powerful intangible benefits. Knoke has observed a mix of expressive incentives that compensate members for their time through the excitement of contributing to a morally just cause and valuing the public aims sought over the horizon.\textsuperscript{107} Contrary to “rational” expectation, such social movement groups remain widespread in the United States and have scored significant victories toward public causes.\textsuperscript{108}

Are they getting it right? Does a common good exist? For Nathan Glazer, the common good is tolerance amidst diversity.\textsuperscript{109} Robert Dahl has argued it exists in procedure

\textsuperscript{106} Held, \textit{Models of Democracy}, 232.

\textsuperscript{107} Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 7-8.

\textsuperscript{108} Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 142.

rather than product. Guttmans has agreed with both, particularly since conflicting values require compromised outcomes amidst “provisional” truth, yet she has insisted there is moral imperative to seek toward its closest pluralist approximation. Barber has suggested that the common good grows from accepting the commonality of the problem since most issues affect countries and continents, not just individuals.

If member-based public interest associations benefit democracy, which theories of government, political economy and organization provide hospitable ground? Some deliberative democrats will wax enthusiastic. Other deliberative democrats have hedged their bets. Theda Skocpol combined with Marshall Ganz and Ziad Munson to develop an historical institutionalist theory highlighting the widespread interdependence of

---


111 Guttmans and Thompson, Why Deliberative Democracy, 14.

112 Barber, A Place For Us, 42-43. Ownership of responsibility – Barber’s lauded “us” — would, he believed, fire up the will to imaginatively progress through the challenge. In this fight, public interest groups are distinctive in arguing, in theory, all sides of the equation as they contribute their expertise and combined authority to the task.

113 Harry C. Boyte, “Building the Commonwealth: Citizenship as Public Work,” in Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions, ed. Steven L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 263, 269-70. Boyte developed a public work model in which process helped negotiate among difference toward John Dewey’s vision of a “shared way of life.” He expanded “an associated idea of citizenship . . . which [took] a public work perspective [that] democracy is the way we meet our common challenges and create the common world, the commonwealth.”

114 Jean Cohen, “Trust, Voluntary Association and Workable Democracy: The Contemporary American Discourse of Civil Society,” in Democracy and Trust, ed. Mark E. Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 223; Cohen, “Civil Society Talk,” 70-72. A follower of Habermas, Cohen was less sure than Boyte of associations’ allure or influence. While they help produce generalized trust through horizontal interpersonal encounter, he contended that associations were ultimately less important to democracy than the “legal norms of procedural fairness, impartiality and justice that give structure to the state and some civil institutions, limit favoritism and arbitrariness, and protect merit [as] the sine qua non for society wide ‘general trust.’” Cohen urged the development of professional ethics specific to associations to better qualify them as public participants. As part of that effort, Cohen advocated close examination of power, money and media whose “public glare” in theory made interaction fair and deliberative contribution more extensive.
associations and all levels of government.\textsuperscript{115} Ganz and Kenneth Andrews applied the institutionalist approach toward organization and movement study, providing models of leadership and internal organization that power highly successful nonprofit organizations.\textsuperscript{116} Association scholarship has been energetic in response to Olson\textsuperscript{117} challenging his dreary arguments by acknowledging his explanation for low numbers, but charging his lack of understanding for those who do join or vote. The academic exploration of values and incentives that promote engagement in collective issues is active indeed. R.H. Salisbury developed an expressive theory of participation in 1969.\textsuperscript{118} David Knoke considered Salisbury’s expressive motivation in the context of political economy, noting that joining will affect the distribution of important public resources.\textsuperscript{119} Realistic association

\textsuperscript{115} Skocpol, Ganz and Munson, “A Nation of Organizers,” 6, 527; Skocpol, Diminished Democracy, 23-57. Imitation of federal organization and procedure, widely adopted irrespective of advocacy intent, gave associations legitimacy, stature and vertical form as early as the early 19th century, joining remote cabin-dwellers to the urban organizers who competitively raced against other associations to link them with national political life. In the process, associations matched the federal government’s “political opportunity structures.”

\textsuperscript{116} Andrews, “Leadership, Membership, and Voice,” 1191. Andrews believed an organization’s manner of operation enhanced chances to draw members and win morally just cause. Witnessing phenomenal success of environmental groups like the Sierra Club hiring co-author Ganz’s expertise, he could be right.

\textsuperscript{117} Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 38, 40. Olson’s 1965 theory had claimed irrational basis to join a generalized interest organization, wounding such organizations’ capacity to solve collective action problems. The rational choice theory was later “expanded” by John Mark Hansen in reference to paradoxical voting patterns. He submitted that “if people are rational … and they receive only collective benefits, they will not turn out to vote … .The result will be the same whether they participate or not.” The dispute has high stakes, for Hume’s “tragedy of the commons” is that if all don’t join in corrective change, each individually will fail.

\textsuperscript{118} Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 48; R.H. Salisbury, “An Exchange Theory of Groups,” Midwest Journal of Political Science 13, no. 1 (February 1969): 1. Salisbury wrote, “expressive actions are values of a person or group. Rather than instrumentally pursuing interests or values, … benefits are derived from the expression itself … . The reward is in the process of participation itself, not playing a part in successful policy change.”

\textsuperscript{119} Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 2-3. Political economy therein was described as “the acquisition and allocation of organizational resources to collective objectives” involving individuals, organizations and an enlarged polity.
theory has to account for the voluntary sector’s frequently-vested and massive political power.\textsuperscript{120}

Warren concluded in 2001 that the relationship of associations and democracy was inadequate to fuel distinct democratic theory, but enabled democratic health to the extent that more study was required.\textsuperscript{121} Two years later, he had revised his position, casting his lot with developmental deliberative democrats: “The deliberative elements of a democracy can only be organized along associational lines and the deliberative publics can only emerge where there exists social bases in voluntary associations.”\textsuperscript{122} If these elements are judged crucial, as he came to believe, healthy civic membership associations are critical.

Which Americans use associations?

Those who join associations consider the act either in their personal interest (however defined) or in line with the values they hold.\textsuperscript{123} In that sense, these members look at membership as an investment.\textsuperscript{124} Either way, pre-formed attitudes and interests encounter the skills of entrepreneurial leaders who have learned to dangle motivation.

\textsuperscript{120} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 38. Political interest group analysts comprise a massive and distinct field, featuring Theodore Lowi, David Truman, Robert Dahl and many others. While political parties presently exercise a fraction of their former influence, associations carry the representative ball, delivering their members’ interests to Capital Hill, executive offices, and court cases. Though interest groups per se are out of fashion because of the appearance of manipulative inequities, associations’ civil society mantle does little to mask the same function and result.

\textsuperscript{121} Warren, \textit{Democracy and Association}, 4.


\textsuperscript{123} Maloney, “Interest Groups, Social Capital, and Democratic Politics,” 309.

\textsuperscript{124} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 19.
Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady have argued that it matters a great deal for both “voice and equality” who accepts the invitation and gets involved. Their civic voluntarism model focused on the time, money, articulation, expression and recruitment that make engagement more likely and sustainable. Such factors have a profound effect on personal skill development, national policy orientation, and the distribution of future resources. In that sense, unequal association participation presents a critical enhancement of already existing inequalities of voice, opportunity and acceptance of democratic process.

Several authors have produced evidence that recruitment practices reinforce segmentation of an already dissonant population. Anne Skorkjaer Binderkrantz acknowledged bonding tendencies for particularized interest groups, but disputed their application to those groups dedicated to the public interest, arguing that generalized goals, principles, wide recruitment, and expressive experience draw a consistently wider crowd. But even with a positive assessment of diverse targeting, Verba’s issue of time, money and information leads to the possibility of public interest class bias:

More public interest groups need not necessarily increase competition; it may mean more of the same…. Schattschneider (1966:35) argued that ‘the flaw in the

---


126 Kaufman, For the Common Good? 8; and Pamela A. Popielarz and J. Miller McPherson, “On the Edge or In Between: Niche Position, Niche Overlap, and the Duration of Voluntary Association Memberships,” The American Journal of Sociology 101, no. 3 (November 1995): 698. Kaufman observed that many associations arose to provide lifelines for new immigrants in an otherwise overwhelming, hostile new world. Their natural tendency to reproduce member characteristics presented “a stark challenge to the argument that associationalism can help bridge gaps in the social fabric, joining disparate populations together in fellowship and solidarity.” Popielarz contended that organizations systematically competed for members with shared socio-demographic characteristics. They would most reliably sustain those who identified with pre-existing members, consolidating an already existing niche.

pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent . . . Pressure politics is a selective process ill-designed to serve diffuse interests. The system is skewed and loaded, and unbalanced in favor of a fraction of a minority.¹²⁸

If indeed public interest membership is class-loaded, group purposes may still remain defiantly general. Verba asserted that skewed participation could actually improve the quality of the discourse: “A participatory system that over-represents [those who choose to participate] . . . also over-represents the politically informed and tolerant.”¹²⁹ Open invitation is important, but the lack of control over those who choose to join makes theorists look intently at the motivation for those who do, in recognition of their outsized democratic role.

Why people join associations

The reasoning behind lonely activation from a disengaged culture will derive from a scramble of personal and public ideals with competing signals to the receiving organization of choice.¹³⁰ Robert H. Salisbury’s exchange theory of interest groups describes four kinds of benefits leaders can offer members. Some offer material, tangible inducements. Others promise social or “solidary” linkage. Additional groups present purposive invitation to help achieve a policy goal. Most relevant to the League of Women Voters, some associations offer expressive incentives of volunteer participation as a self-actualizing way to activate one’s values.¹³¹ People will most likely respond to a mix of incentives to both join in the first place and become durable, active members.

¹²⁸ Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 187.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 188. Jordan and Maloney quoted Verba.


Those whose decisions are based primarily on tangible self-interest are outside the scope of this thesis. But civic membership organizations are not immune to self-interest or “solidary” social motivation. Regardless of high-minded rationales, serious-appearing people are capable of selecting membership via extremely personal reasons.\(^{132}\) With general focus on public interest groups and specific concern for the League of Women Voters in 1960, Helen Gouldner concluded “commitment to the specific values of an organization is distinct from commitment to the organization as a whole.” Those who both joined and stayed did so less from their expressed idealism than for the “group cohesiveness, integration, influence and morale.”\(^{133}\) They would consider switching to alternative, similarly oriented groups if the latter balance shifted.

Yet many people will prioritize their support for generalized outcomes for rationalizing their membership in a public interest association. Verba submitted that more people are willing to work toward collective ends than elitists appreciate.\(^{134}\) Mansbridge observed the effective allure of soft incentives such as altruism, duty, power, social standing, reputation, thrill, or satisfaction. Expressive motivation to join could be even more powerful. J.M. Hirschman disagreed with rational choice theorists that association membership was a cost to be individually assessed, noting that the act of participation was often considered a

\(^{132}\) John Mark Hansen, “The Political Economy of Group Membership,” *The American Political Science Review* 79, no. 1 (March 1985): 79. Most joiners’ motivations will be affected by their “personal webs” of family, extended community, and other memberships. These webs will both spawn the values creating the interest and likely alert the entrepreneurial recruiters who competitively draw those of similar value orientation in. Such recruitment efforts are very “context sensitive” and encourage both expressive and solidary potential. Personal linkage holds obvious tendency toward homogeneity but can also enable unexpected bridging combinations.


\(^{134}\) Jordan and Maloney, *Democracy and Interest Groups*, 51-53, 56.
personal benefit. Even Olson admitted that his theory was less applicable to generalized groups. Soft incentives tend to provide the foundation for public interest support.

Warren has noted that members’ motivation to join tends to contribute toward an association’s structure.135 Those choosing to join hierarchically structured groups frequently do so on behalf of the advocacy made possible through clarity, efficiency and reach. Some members might voluntarily seek nominal participation, unwilling to belong on a more active basis. Those organizations with federated structure tend to blend advocacy and developmental member engagement. Retaining the voluntary character of joining and leaving is essential to having viable individual participation.

Once members assemble, a separate bureaucratic dynamic is launched. Organizational theory competes with substantive zeal to explain structure, behavior and sustainability.136 A particular aspect of membership associations – not relevant to more streamlined “protest businesses” – is their need for member service, in itself requiring staff that draws resources from program funds. The extent of member engagement will be affected by budget decisions relative to competing needs for efficiency, quality control, and voice purification through centralization and hierarchy. For this reason, association executives are attuned to why members join and will weigh professionalized effectiveness against inclusive invitation to appropriately express appreciation and loyalty.

To the extent members share motivation, they might hope for aggregated influence over the association’s direction. But Olson observed that common intention didn’t translate to common action partly because the “common” frequently got perverted in the policy and delivery stages. Some organizations would misjudge the motivation of their members;

135 Warren, Democracy and Association, 95-98.

others simply disregarded them, concluding that new recruitment campaigns would compensate for the products of their autonomous direction.\textsuperscript{137}

While some joining motivation is unmistakably illiberal, Nancy Rosenblum has persuasively argued that government neutrality is critical. She urged public focus to remain on free conditions of joining and withdrawing, which in motion would provide "relatively benign outlets for... narrow self-interested behavior."\textsuperscript{138} It is also healthy to consider the motivations that frequently forestall membership, public-interested or otherwise. Olson’s position in regard to generalized groups was that a rational person would see the folly, but other reasons to remain disengaged may apply.\textsuperscript{139} If bad choices exist, surely the decision to avoid them can be celebrated as civically beneficial.

Those who take the civic plunge tend to be a distinct breed. Jordan and Maloney associated ‘the ‘committed’ with an ability and willingness to afford the subscription, with a high sense of efficacy and a belief in the efficacy of the group and participation.’\textsuperscript{140} The general trend immerses more deeply a group already inclined to vote and deliberate. The representative impact of their enhanced voice will be affected by whether one agrees with Schattschneider or Verba that bias can be a good thing.

\textsuperscript{137} Olson, The Logic of Collective Action, 5, 176-78. Such disconnect is made more likely by the development of "policy communities" and "mutual dependencies" within public interest associations and the nonprofit sector at large. The sheer number of non-profit groups with similar ends but highly different means will bend motivations and methods. Reaching for idealistic goals, mini-fiefdoms develop their own bureaucratic needs, social tendencies and practical political alliances. Negative impact will be a far easier product than faithful positive delivery. Those resolutions that are achieved will frequently be diluted through compromising incentives to encourage sufficient support among competing groups. Sector accountability for dream failure will frequently be in short supply.

\textsuperscript{138} Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 143. Jordan and Maloney quoted Rosenblum.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 142. Examples include individual dissatisfaction with choices, insufficient funds (membership always involves some form of personal cost), irrelevance of tax-deductibility, constrained time, or lack of certainty that membership would contribute to positive outcome.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 144.
The problem is that the trend is distinctly going in the private direction. Interest groups tenuously carrying membership labels have exploded in numbers. Most of them serve particular interests and operate remote from their contributors. While political parties remain in decline and associations provide the most available engagement vehicle, it is distinctly worrisome that these privately-driven groups have so many supporters. They are highly influential in securing inequitable versions of “public” outcome yet appear impenetrably vague in composition and direction.\(^{141}\) Absent a legal structure that adequately governs the non-profit sector, associations can be either a feeble attempt at self-rule or an audacious pretense of engagement in a nonpublic “democratic” government.

Civic associations like the League of Women Voters consider this emerging association environment to present serious challenge to viable self-rule. They therefore support reformed rules for the entire non-profit sector and exhort citizens to examine groups carefully before joining.\(^ {142}\) Unsurprisingly, these sensible positions are viewed as highly political given the resources at stake, yet their theoretical rationale is compelling for a country priding itself on equal and fair opportunity.

**What wounds or sustains democratically beneficial associations?**

Equal deference to particularized associations is not featured in this assessment of future prospects for democratically beneficial associations. Specific and vested interest groups, with or without members, will undeniably continue to thrive. But those of more

---

\(^{141}\) Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), x. Crenson and Ginsberg have credited the accelerating associational trend toward “privatization” of American democracy as directly responsible for widespread citizen alienation from public life through robbing their motivation to join.

generalized character have significant tools and trends in their favor. First they need to identify primary problems.

One, of course, is money. To operate, they need funds to at the very least serve coffee or more preferably support quality programs and research that will reward their membership and fuel an informed voice. In this area, public interest associations suffer from the vastly higher sums available to particularized organizations. Private money does exist to solve collective problems the public won’t fund, but Americans prefer to give it away to selective populations rather than addressing the totality. The number of national charities has increased by 63.7% from 1999 to 2009, with a huge combined treasury, simply mammoth compared to civic groups’ draw.143 Americans seem to be confirming Tocqueville’s observation that they will contract out almost anything in a fashion that makes them feel good.

Another problem is undeniable. Less people are joining bridging, civic associations. In fact, these associations are disappearing. From 1999 to 2009, participatory civic leagues, social welfare organizations, and local associations of employees (a big chunk of the category) fell by 10.4% to a paltry 111,849, representing 7.1% of all national nonprofits and 3% of charities’ income.144 Those that do survive may do so through offering to shoulder the burden of task completion, draining some self-help capacity.

Olson’s free-rider problem provides another challenge. It seems established that the bulk of people will not choose public interest groups, preferring others to carry the burden


144 Ibid.
and limiting their commitments toward more direct gain. Levine has noted a manipulative
dynamic that contracts out "participation" to weight the outcome.\textsuperscript{145} In the face of biased
media and big money, public interest groups find it difficult to compete.

The lack of fairness on the playing field poses ethical challenges. Increasingly, public
interest associations channel their Progressive forebears by targeting the powerful and
wealthy on behalf of less-advantaged populations. Political support for these Habermas-
worthy attempts toward equitable consideration of majority-scale needs is ironically
crippled by reformist election cleansing that leashes political parties and unions, thereby
"undermin[ing] the very institutions that had been most loyal to ordinary people."\textsuperscript{146}

Meanwhile, many non-profit compatriots have embraced the rewarding area of
federal contracting to perform public services. In 2001, the federal government funded one
third of the independent sector.\textsuperscript{147} This practice has compensated for some groups’
declining membership dues, but discourages a measure of volunteering and breeds
uncomfortably intimate government relations already compromised by their increasing
lobbying. The precious normative associational appeal is losing credibility.

Survival is also impacted by shifting moral sands and the traditionally short public
attention toward matters of principle. The Progressives had suffered from this tendency
when President Wilson misjudged the public’s readiness for further reform; they wanted
speakeasies and shortened hems instead. Expressive groups are easy to start but harder to

\textsuperscript{145} Even in the heyday of the 1970s, groups like Common Cause and Public Citizen managed
to recruit much less than 1% of the American people – mostly wealthy individuals for whom a $20
membership fee was a negligible expense. Meanwhile (as Olson’s theory might have predicted),
commercial organizations were able to overcome the free rider problem by spending money.
Companies could stir up "grassroots" pressure, and media figures could boost their ratings by

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{147} Warren, “The Political Role of Non-profits in a Democracy,” 48.
sustain because of values’ fickle reception.\textsuperscript{148} Particularized interests gain in this climate, powered with tangible benefits to win the day while disheartened idealists retire.\textsuperscript{149}

Some see public interest membership groups as an expensive luxury in comparison to the preponderance of groups in “protest business” mode. Embracing centralized authority has allowed these latter non-profits to update time-honored hierarchical methods in order to evolve into skilled lobbyists fueled mainly by “checkbook participation” to reach the advocacy home-plate.\textsuperscript{150} It is difficult to validate legitimate democratic benefits of association membership if the supporters show their civic behavior solely through financial support. Increasing numbers weigh whether it’s beneficial to carry members at all, and find that fundraising could easily recoup the equivalent pittance from membership dues.\textsuperscript{151} The member engagement so beneficial to civil society brings sizeable costs through dedicated staff time and space and may dilute the professional image and confuse the policy direction. In this competitive climate, may only qualified volunteers apply?\textsuperscript{152} Have members and internal democracy become “‘non-lucrative distraction[s]?’”\textsuperscript{153} While some democratic

\textsuperscript{148} Salisbury, “An Exchange Theory of Groups,” 19-20, 31-32. Some savvy leaders appear to gamble with members’ idealism to stay in the game, lobbying for generalized purposes when their membership is high and particularizing them as the numbers drop, with the shifts providing profit or deficit in leader discretion separate from member control. Clearly, to the extent the association is to be democratically beneficial, such shifts in value base may seem sustainably expedient but might ultimately be judged through member resignation. Expressive groups need to be alert to the management tenor of the leaders they develop.

\textsuperscript{149} Levine, \textit{The New Progressive Era}, 23.

\textsuperscript{150} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 88, 114. Skocpol is credited for these now widely used catch phrases.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 33, 161-162.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 161-162. Jordan and Maloney provide extensive provocative argument for the view that members may be superfluous.

\textsuperscript{153} Maloney, “Interest Groups, Social Capital, and Democratic Politics,” 315. Maloney quoted Skocpol.
potential exists in a well-stated position, the distinctly undemocratic methods associated with its formation increasingly exclude citizens from the public sphere.

Putting aside the array of motivations, members and dollars are finite no matter how weighty the public interest may be. How can public interest groups survive the brutal fiscal season, let alone the long haul? They can begin by noting the many scholars and tacticians assigned to this project in appreciation that such groups are among the finest jewels in democracy's social capital crown. These specialists have made a lot of progress:

Social organizing is emerging as an academic field that blends sociology, public administration and political theory to explore models of successful social change. Academics like Ganz, Skocpol and Andrews have discovered that responsible recipes tend to be complicated, combining context, skill, resources, organizational practices, group density, membership, activism, teamwork and program quality. But the recipe is most definitely doable through deliberate orchestration.

The most consistent ingredient is insistence on superb, self-driven, idealistic yet savvy leaders, committed to building common purpose by accepted rules in order to spawn social change. Hardly Bolshevik egomaniacs, they are organizational entrepreneurs skilled in motivating and empowering other people and infused with authority to keep the

---

154 Kaufman, *For the Common Good*, 6. Kaufman noted the "competitive dynamics of widespread volunteerism": Because individuals have limited time, money and energy, there is a natural limit to the number and diversity of organizations likely to flourish simultaneously. Sociologists refer to this as organizational ecology, or the way in which organizations interact with one another in competition for finite resources and opportunities.


156 Ibid., 1191-1192.
organizational rudder straight and effective.\textsuperscript{157} Associations need to invest in multi-level leadership development to insure both current and future success.\textsuperscript{158}

Good association leaders can take a page out of the “protest business” playbook, addressing success as a science. Business models exist just for them, such as \textit{Enterprising Nonprofits: A Toolkit for Social Entrepreneurs},\textsuperscript{159} which assist association executives to balance membership demands with the achievement of maximum impact via minimal resources. Such skills come mainly from tough experience, but “organizational studies” exist to help make the appropriate judgments.\textsuperscript{160} A portion of professional organizers will help.

Public interest associations have a highly complex job of funding and delivering connection, activity and advocacy.\textsuperscript{161} Technology has become indispensable for achieving the balance, and can permit incredible activity to generate from few people. Rejecting the indispensable tools of internet and computers is not an option, and investment in equipment and expertise is critical. Along the way, it remains important for these associations to recall they represent a wide population who may not have computer access.

Increasingly, associations need professional fundraisers to sustain themselves in a competitive environment. Dues will be supplemented with grants and general solicitations.\textsuperscript{162} While direct mail permits widespread message dispersal and increase in

\textsuperscript{157} Skocpol, Ganz and Munson, “A Nation of Organizers,” 10-11.


\textsuperscript{159} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 91. The book is a steal from Amazon.com at $29.70 courtesy of writing efforts of Gregory Dees, Jed Emerson and Peter Economy.

\textsuperscript{160} Andrews, “Leadership, Membership, and Voice,” 1191.

\textsuperscript{161} Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 10.

\textsuperscript{162} Jordan and Maloney, \textit{Democracy and Interest Groups}, 91; and League of Women Voters, “Audited Consolidated Financial Statements and Other Financial Information, League of Voters, June 30, 2009” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters financial statement, 2010). While money needs to come from somewhere, those organizations most versed in survival will anticipate fluctuation and
membership and funding, over-reliance on this measure should be cautioned. Its widespread use is very expensive, taking 48 cents from every dollar raised for past and future fundraising costs, building a development bureaucracy in the process. 163 The practice endangers achievement of trust-enabled public interest through extreme messaging, since it thrives by accentuating urgent danger and “immediate” response, but breeds distrust as a result. Moreover, direct mail narrows what is supposed to be a general audience. 164 Those already less served democratically will not be prospected.

Recruitment is often an energetic organizational investment in anticipation of turnovers. Public interest groups engage in market analysis of those most likely to join and “rationally” skew campaigns accordingly. This methodology, though imperfect for social capital, tends to be predictive and can even be positive through activating members more inclined to act in the public interest. 165 But in the targeting process, it behooves public interest groups to consider those who weren’t on the trolling list and try to widen their recruiting practices to allow for greater diversity. 166

163 Jordan and Maloney, *Democracy and Interest Groups*, 86, 90-91. Direct mail may have reached its saturation point, though many still consider the investment worth it.

164 Ibid., 100-101. Through targeted lists, “groups focus their efforts not on those who need most persuading but on those whose support they are most likely to obtain.” Jordan and Maloney referenced a 1988 study by R. K. Godwin, which noted a practice of reinforced exclusion “because they lack the discretionary income and political interest to subscribe to news magazines or donate to the causes that would place them on [the] prospecting list.”


166 Jordan and Maloney, *Democracy and Interest Groups*, 100.
Declining membership does not necessarily signal concern, since many public interest groups judge second-year drop-out rates between 30 and 40% as normal. But member stalwarts are more central to group effectiveness than numerous pass-throughs. Such loyalty is achieved through internal democratic structure and well-matched social, purposive, tangible and expressive incentives. Personal readiness to share the podium will prove critical for lasting success, a universal challenge for those seeking to change the world.

Public interest members have great faith in active developmental enablement. They aspire toward leadership and deliberative understanding on the way to resolving collective problems. Who wouldn’t want them active? The hard part is keeping the enthusiasm going. Yet examples like the 2008 Democratic Party campaign can occur, breeding bridged, infectious volunteerism on a large scale that seems to bestow legitimacy in its wake. Professional organizers prove key to making such efforts sustainable, fun and on message, and are even capable of producing financial return as a result of volunteer activation.

Some twenty-first century innovators are calling for re-adoption of the old confederated model. Levine has suggested such retroactive innovation was key to Christian Coalition success and is, by competitive emulation, re-entering the progressive public interest sphere. Through making it easier for people to combine effectively, confederated structure can provide a gift to those who care about associations in democracy.

167 Ibid., 91.

168 Knoke, “Associations and Interest Groups,” 12.


Enduring associations will be innovative pushing the membership envelope. Skocpol sensed that people may be surprisingly ripe for the invitation. The business of mobilization is rapidly changing, blending new forms of professional and volunteer methodology. The most creative and democratically important development is in the area of widening the recruitment pool. Personal invitations have a dramatic effect and shouldn’t be written off by those determined to expand citizen engagement. These details are becoming standard to professional organizers’ jobs. Association success stories are rare if they don’t feature them in the mix.

Public interest groups are increasingly banding together for effect, testimony to John Dewey’s faith that “social intelligence” is possible in pursuit of idealistic goals. To the extent they share aims, and many of them do, they bring varying expertise, audience and tools to carry the generalized power of the argument. Their reputations range from conservative to liberal orientation, giving people opportunity to choose a tone yet share a larger goal, succeeding through pragmatism in an otherwise impossible climate.

But while alliances are possible, inter-associational relations are usually competitive for members, dollars and attention. Communities will embrace or reject associational teaches leadership skills. It also brings people together to act cooperatively, thereby building social capital. Because chapters of different organizations can meet and share resources, they may increase the overall capacity of their communities to solve problems. Finally, chapters acquire power and information, so they can sometimes hold their own national organizations accountable.” McCarthy argued federated structures were popular because they were effective. Especially in relation to social change movements, federated groups “use the concept of franchising — well-developed in the replication of units . . . to think about the reproduction of chapters of local social movement organizations (SMOs) based on national movement models.”


172 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 107.

messages in consumer fashion, seeking local fit. Successful associations will likely inveigh public relations skills, dangling a deliberately crafted hook to draw the individual or community in. Those “still on the shelf” have lost the popularity contest.

Associations can add to their authority and future through helping government on public issues. Their role of activating on behalf of public goods can produce the critical votes behind non-particularized legislation. To make progressive headway, it can therefore appear senseless to have combat and distrust as default mode. But Jordan and Maloney note “groups who depend on a membership that receives no selective material rewards must stick close to the protest mode. In effect, they are selling protest.” The reformatory urge is to reject the present in favor of an improved future. To the extent government is culpable in spurring inaction, public interest groups tend to exhort for change and reform.

In fact, confederated public interest groups have unique political influence beyond their aggregated members. Those who choose to engage are frequently highly articulate, possessed of campaigning ardor and empowered through their involvement. Their generalized aims arguably produce higher levels of public respect that can impress constituents and congressmen. Born from an associational tradition that spawned the current “opportunity structure,” intrepid sneaker-shoed crusaders show with regularity and force at their congressman’s door.

As public interest associations manage their sustainability in the current volatile world, it is critical for them to protect their normative core. In particular, their expressive function to allow active volunteers to live their values through participation is positive through encouraging volunteering whether or not the aim is reached. It is important to

---

174 Jordan and Maloney, Democracy and Interest Groups, 119.

protect this active process connecting individuals into the organization’s soul. But in order to be beneficial in Rosenblum’s prosaic sense, associations need to guard against activating only the competent or politically correct. It is unavoidable that members will bring different qualifications, opinions and manners to the table. To encourage involvement, leaders push personal development and tie engagement to organizational benefit. Members’ separate motivations are less important than their presence in the group.176

Association theorists document fast-moving sector evolution. Decisions made to enable survival may shift end-goals and member characteristics beyond recognition. If fortunate combination of management science, circumstance and determination permit aim realization, associations may face the unusual opportunity to pronounce the battle won and disband. New generational choices will render some of the previous forms obsolete. Whichever scenario faces particular associations, they all are addressing changing prospects that are only partly controllable. When the dust momentarily settles, a wide and largely unregulated associational array is likely to remain, but the roster will have changed. It is important for association advocates to acknowledge the force of this competitive freedom even as they examine emerging vehicles for democratic impact.

Do current civic engagement trends matter?

Stubborn positions remain on whether civic engagement in associations has gone up or down.177 But few would disagree that those civic groups specifically and public interest groups more generally with viable membership have indeed declined while professionally-

176 Maloney, “Interest Groups, Social Capital, and Democratic Politics,” 311-313. To achieve a representative mix, associations need to provide a mix of public and private incentives to join, thereby creating a balance of views and a deliberated generalized “better good.”

177 Putnam, Bowling Alone, 27-28; and Cohen, “American Civil Society Talk,” 79. Putnam has contended that there has been a massive drop in joining, with correlated implosion of social capital. Others like Cohen have argued that joining and associations have merely evolved with culture and technology to take different form.
run advocacy groups of either generalized or sectarian character are thriving. Some argue that the professionalized advocacy trend within civil society is actually healthy. Putnam has accepted that shifts in character preserve association activity, but has also submitted that its present form derails national civic capacity. The dominance of particularized advocacy does present major challenge to a democracy with unresolved social differences.

Do fewer members “diminish” democratic opportunity? The predictably unequal results cause great anger and distrust that bleed into other legitimately public issues, insuring higher rates of coercive government action. While the U.S. is highly pluralistic, Skocpol submits its thriving professional associations do not represent that pluralism, arising as they do from oligarchic investment that benefits segments of the middle and upper-classes. As a result, American politics focus mainly on “post-material” issues connected to ”values” and lifestyle. Tax-exempt funding of non-profits and foundations lacks accountability as it powers a spiraling increase in unbalanced political voice.

Yet there is a curious counterbalance at play. Levine and Putnam have observed a correlation between association membership and those who vote. Who remain as active

---

178 Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 127.

179 Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 310. Schudson urged avoidance of unhelpful nostalgia toward a fictionally bonded past, and argued the new forms of engagement continue to provide civic opportunity. He advocated “ordinary but not heroic efforts at information gathering and civic participation” that benefit from advocacy groups’ cues and information to make optimal public judgments.

180 “My argument is not that direct-mail organizations are morally evil or politically ineffective. It may be more efficient technically for us to hire other people to act for us politically. However, such organizations provide neither connectedness among members nor direct engagement in civic give-and-take, and they certainly do not represent ‘participatory democracy.’ Citizenship by proxy is an oxymoron.” Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 160.


182 Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 222-223, 231, 238.

members? If Skocpol’s Massachusetts study is correct, they may frequently be those increasingly isolated members of the lower middle class, left behind and staunch in views absent cross-class deliberation.\footnote{Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 191, 242.} These narrowly formed groups\footnote{Warren, \textit{Democracy and Association}, 211. Homogeneous groups tend to reduce the diversity still present, promoting an undemocratic version of member views and further isolating those already without voice.} vote and are highly capable of producing confounding results for the member-less advocacy groups that appeared to have won the pre-election debate. Professionally run groups, it turns out, are less capable of predicting “member” turnout on voting day. This combination serves to make prospects for deliberative democracy and cross-class legislation very difficult.

Skocpol has noted that past associational trends are irretrievable, imperfect and lacking in current potential to create prosperity.\footnote{Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 259.} While associations persist in America, their new forms challenge equitable representation. Given the high stakes for workable government, problem resolution and, particularly, viable self-rule, it is becoming increasingly urgent to reform the voluntary sector that remains to allow for healthy use of the prevailing forms of combination and to encourage survival of those forms most beneficial to democracy.

America’s current urge to combine can be made more positive if a wider population is thereby empowered and rules of engagement are made fairer. Skocpol therefore has called for close examination of the unavoidably interdependent opportunity structure and creation of a national standard for service delivery. In addition, she has advocated favorable tax treatment and subsidized media time for those associations that legitimately activate and empower class-bridging members, though she steered clear of voicing support for

---

\footnote{Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 191, 242.}

\footnote{Warren, \textit{Democracy and Association}, 211. Homogeneous groups tend to reduce the diversity still present, promoting an undemocratic version of member views and further isolating those already without voice.}

\footnote{Skocpol, \textit{Diminished Democracy}, 259. Skocpol has highlighted the enduring voluntary associations within the state of Maine, notably absent affluent majority.}
generalized versus specific aims. Finally, she has agreed with Shklar that citizenship needs higher public recognition to encourage individual valuation, thereby advocating public voting day holidays and other measures that increase widespread engagement in moments of democratic decision.\textsuperscript{187} All of these measures would help civic associations.

Levine — in self-proclaimed Progressive fashion — believes that the democratic impact of current and future forms of combination will be enhanced to the extent legislative and executive branch means are applied to shift the balance more favorably toward public interest groups. He therefore has argued compellingly against neutrality and for wide-ranging government intervention that includes heightened government ethics and accountability; general tax reform; vouchers to publicly encourage volunteerism and the formation of new associations; more grassroots deliberation; expanded public money for public functions; reorienting the media toward its public role; revising tax benefits and penalties for voluntary associations contingent on civic contribution; and examining professionalized public interest groups’ usage of “membership.”\textsuperscript{188} Application of these tools could help determine whether public interest groups will continue to be in the democratic mix. But it is also possible that they will be judged too partisan in impact to legislatively move forward. Shklar’s enhanced “citizenship” may have a more neutral and viable ring.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 280, 282-83, 280.

\textsuperscript{188} Levine, \textit{The New Progressive Era}, 212-213.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF A "CONGENIAL FORUM FOR CHANGE"¹

Shifting to consideration of the League of Women Voters within an evolutionary frame, readers should carry forward theoretical indicators of democratically beneficial public interest groups. Whether the League’s origins and subsequent history measure up to Mark E. Warren’s seven measures of democratic associational ecology² cited within this thesis, or more stringently, those developed in Chapter 2 on pages 26-30, will be suggested by the characteristics of its leaders and members; its development of purpose, structure and process; the deliberate selection of operational style; reaction to shifting culture; and its trajectory toward organizational strength. Fortunately, the story is interesting, with great characters, laudable plans, human misjudgments and direct historical intersection with familiar events to encourage those less concerned with democracy and the League to read on regardless. Historical context will link closely to the League’s distinctive associational focus on process and expressive values. Its singular “congenial” public image as a “forum for change” will directly impact its internal and external democratic potential.

Suffrage origins

The faded, staged photos that survive the suffrage era ill-describe the bravery, determination and sacrifice of the women who engaged in one of America’s toughest fights for self-rule, well aware they were on familiar historical ground.³ Women were by far the

---


³ Alexander Keyssar, The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xxi. The expansion of enfranchisement, predating 1776 to the present, has volatiley swung between sudden liberalization and fierce, seemingly unstoppable, retrenchment, in response to war, frontier settlement, political competition, urbanization, class
largest group of excluded voters in the U.S. when they began their seventy-two years of
association-driven effort to win the right to vote in 1848. Stumped along the way by the
Civil War, nativism, economic swings and morality wars, suffragists learned the mighty
lessons of persuasion, veiled power, circumspect alliance and female solidarity. Exponential
growth came with the widening of class representation, a ramping up of assertive tactics,
and a honing of federated association infrastructure that mobilized the path to success. As
the gavel landed with Tennessee’s ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18,
1920, the country could share in the suffragists’ sense that a “common good” could now be
advanced by political housecleaning and social progress made possible by the new female
voting public. But the euphoria would disappear within months. As the women’s
movement left behind their exalted social movement status to evolve into more standard

conflict, immigration, expansion of advocacy rights and spread of faith in democratic ideals. This
oscillating treatment of voting rights continues in 2011, hyper-political in an age of razor-thin
electoral margins. Only those with healthy patience, solid determination, considerable skill and
historical luck advance the gradual progress surviving the swings.

Catt, president of the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and founder of the
League, would comment post-ratification that suffrage’s seventy years effort had involved “56
referendum campaigns directed at male voters plus 480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit
suffrage amendments to voters, 47 campaigns to get constitutional conventions to include woman
suffrage planks, 30 campaigns to get presidential party campaigns to include woman suffrage planks
in party platforms and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses.”

5 Robert P.J. Cooney, Winning the Vote: The Triumph of the American Woman Suffrage
Movement (Santa Cruz: American Graphic Press, 2005), xiv. A wide range of suffrage tactics helped
the movement crest and win, including leaflets, petitions, speeches, editorials, parades, pageants,
spectacles, rallies and, with the advent of the National Woman’s Party (NWP), demonstrations,
arrests and shock-value. While few activists applauded all approaches, the combined effect worked to
increase women’s suffrage state by state.

6 Marilyn Gittell and Teresa Shtob, “Changing Women’s Roles in Political Volunteerism and
Reform of the City” in “Supplement on Women and the American City,” Signs 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980):
S67-S78. Jane Addams, affiliated with Hull House, pacifist work, NAWSA and unions, was an inspiring
example of the Progressive influences dominant within the suffrage movement. She foresaw the
political dimension of the nascent social reform movement as she pushed child labor laws, greater
hygiene facilities, housing safety and concern for the “community.”

58
political players, their powerful bridging alliance would begin to fracture, not to coalesce again until 1972.7

The women who had powered the move toward ratification had been extraordinary pioneers, featuring ministers, labor activists, journalists, doctors and teachers. Carrie Chapman Catt, president of NAWSA's crested two million members, had been a stalwart visionary as well — particularly as an association bureaucrat, personally establishing the confederated structure that enabled mobilization to weather the decades toward 1920.8 Convinced that NAWSA's structure and "front-door lobbying" held closer claim to victory than Alice Paul's theatrics within the NWP,9 Catt urged the former's final convention on March 24, 1919 to "finish the fight" against disenfranchisement through converting its

---

7 "Before national suffrage was achieved, a great many women — equally excluded from this basic right of citizenship — could come under the same umbrella of 'votes for women.' Once the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, the lines that divided women — class, race, ideology — became more significant. By gaining the individual right they had so vigorously sought, they laid the groundwork for the fracturing of female community." Lynn Dumenil, "The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s," OAH Magazine of History 21, no. 3 (July 2007): 24. See also Anne N. Costain, "Representing Women: The Transition from Social Movement to Interest Group" in "Special Issue on Women and Politics," The Western Political Quarterly 34, no. 1 (March 1981): 100-104.

8 Louise Young, In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920 – 1970 (Contributions in American Studies) (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989), 8-15. NAWSA had emerged from a period of suffrage splits to reunite the movement in 1890 through Catt and Susan B. Anthony's intervention, blending the American Women's Suffrage Association and the National Woman's Suffrage Association in 1890 following decades of sometimes bitter disagreement on tactics, goals and alliances. Catt in particular responded to the moment's challenge through diversifying membership, building coalitions and muscling out a grassroots membership structure that could lobby all levels of community and government.

9 Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830 – 1930," The Journal of American History 77, no. 3 (December 1990): 864-885; and Costain, "Representing Women," 100-113. Paul brought remarkable courage, resolve and British suffragette inspiration to the suffrage fight, and succeeded in gaining daily, sometimes distinctly angry, national attention. Following President Wilson's declaration of war against Germany and Austria in 1917, she and her NWP cohorts began a provocative, sometimes violent campaign against Wilson with hunger strikes, effigy burnings, property destruction and virulent public attacks on his reputation and actions. They were repeatedly arrested and imprisoned on flimsy charge, and were force-fed and beaten in prison. One could plausibly argue that it was NWP's extreme tactics that eventually exhausted the country and Wilson into agreeing to suffrage rather than suffering international embarrassment of democratic suppression at home while promoting democracy abroad. Yet few would challenge the conclusion that it was the accomplishments of NAWSA and its predecessors that took the country to that edge and gained widespread support.
identity to a new League of Women Voters, dedicated to preparing women for full
citizenship rights and educating the country about issues at hand.\textsuperscript{10} Like others in the room
nodding enthusiastic assent, Catt saw the League as a political player addressing great
democratic opportunity, in which women’s nonpartisanship by virtue of previous exclusion
would help sweep away “bad political habits,” reinvigorating an improved electorate
through the League’s future civic education campaigns.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{A tough beginning}

Upon its official launch on February 20, 1920, the League faced immediate
challenges to its ability to “finish the fight” intact. The most immediate assignment would be
preparing women for their first countrywide presidential vote, months away. Most women
were clueless how to pull the lever, let alone consider criteria for electoral choice, and the
new League would help educate them for the task. Having ceded the presidency to Maud
Wood Park, honorary president Catt urged women to take advantage of the historic
moment:

\begin{quote}
The vote is a power, a weapon of offense and defense . . . . Use it intelligently,
conscientiously, prayerfully. No soldier in the suffrage army has labored and
suffered to get a ‘place’ for you. Their motive has been that women would aim
higher than their own selfish ambitions, that they would serve the common good.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In November 1920 failure came on massive scale, with turnout hitting an historic low. The
primary tragedy came from both inflated expectations, which burdened the League and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Barbara Stuhler, \textit{For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters} (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 22.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 33. Catt later judged compulsory civic education unnecessary.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Cooney, \textit{Winning the Vote}, 436.
\end{flushright}
other women’s groups with a defensive distraction as they fought for public respect among initial derision, and the reality of widespread apathy on the part of both men and women.\textsuperscript{13}

The League also came under criticism for its projected nonpartisan stance from both established politicians, who feared a female challenge to party primacy,\textsuperscript{14} and suffrage activists like Paul, who advocated gender-block voting to achieve an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) on the Nineteenth Amendment’s surging tide.\textsuperscript{15} It could be argued that President Harding and Coolidge’s elections, so destructive of Progressive aims cherished by League members, drew in part from the League’s restraint from drawing partisan lines in post-war sands.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Sara Alpern and Dale Baum, “Female Ballots: The Impact of the Nineteenth Amendment,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 16, no. 1 (Summer 1985): 46, 56-57; Kristi Anderson, \textit{After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1, 7-28, 95-105; and Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 2. Some men argued that women generally and the League in particular had failed the country and their own membership with women’s low electoral turnout. Addressing whether women’s votes were a bust, muckraker Charles Edward Russell “declared that it would be ‘absurd’ to consider the reform a success. In spite of earlier worries about the breakup of families or hopes for a transformed world of equality, nothing had changed except that ‘the number of docile ballot droppers has approximately been doubled.’” It has proved historically inaccurate to exclusively blame women for that particular low turnout or “docility.” Alpern and Baum join with Anderson in noting the absence of national quantitative data separating the 1920 vote by gender, observing considerable variation by region, population density and ethnicity in terms of women’s votes on record. Their findings challenge the common assumptions of the 1920s that women as a group failed to show independence or interest, though apathy was undeniably in the national mix. Young concludes that it would take years of historical analysis to appreciate “the complexity of the psycho-cultural process required to make political participation a meaningful engagement for so severely subordinated a class… [The new political right had to become] merely a political instrumentality.”
  \item Alpern and Baum, “Female Ballots,” 43. When the League was formed in 1920, the governor of New York had chided them publicly for being, in his view, a female block organization, arguing forcefully they must integrate into existing party organizations.
  \item Ibid., 61, 63. The NWP urged women to be single-issue voters for the ERA, a position the League rejected. Its \textit{Woman Citizen} took issue with Paul, titling its editorial “No Sex Line Up.” The \textit{Citizen} argued presciently that women would not vote for women per se but rather would choose by class and personal interests. Catt and Maud Wood Park sought long-range maturation, improving the \textit{competence} of women to take on the new duties of citizenship \textit{irrespective} of the parties they chose to support and officially maintaining nonpartisan position toward specific candidacies. Alpern and Baum assert the League contributed to post-1920 frustration of the women’s movement through “opt[ing] for assimilation in the naïve hope of becoming men’s equals overnight.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Initial membership figures also proved disappointing. Perhaps because of the new flapper era, the League’s expectations for earnest, intense engagement produced fewer than 100,000 of NAWSA’s millions as active members. While Park hoped for the League to be an “every woman’s organization,” it quickly became apparent that those rising through the 1920s’ ranks would be a special breed, distinct from more standard women’s clubs then coming into full association vibrancy.

While some women literally went clubbing, it was becoming increasingly clear that a fight remained to make the vote uniformly real for all American women and men. Catt’s initial guess that the League’s work to launch women into political life could be completed within five years proved premature. Practiced League lobbyists observed that in the absence of government and political party advocacy for those most vulnerable to arbitrary or deliberate exclusion, the League would need to help defend the new vote. Fortunately,

16 For membership figures through the 1920s, see Young, *In the Public Interest*, 153; and Stuhler, *For the Public Record*, 249. These figures could understandably be interpreted as personal affront to long-striving suffragists, granted upon victory a contracting, distracted audience.

17 Stuhler, *For the Public Record*, 33. “Not all suffrage women joined the League. Some simply drifted away and some younger suffragists found the new behavioral freedoms of the 1920s an enticing distraction. Other women followed their reform-minded inclinations into organizations focused on education, world peace, and other interests . . . . If there was one development that characterized the post-suffragist era, it proved to be the myriad opportunities for participation of women volunteers in a host of associations reflecting a wide range of programs and projects. The age of the woman as volunteer was about to come into full flower.” (Italics added.)


19 Anderson, *After Suffrage*, 46-50; and Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 224-243. Post-1920 anti-female vote activity was rationalized as preserving women’s good character, or at least political bosses’ power, by keeping them away from the polls. Low voter turnout in 1920 was at least partly due to institutional and behavioral obstructions by party officials, local judges and private citizens. Those most durably obstructed were lower-class women and men ill-equipped to challenge the frequently arbitrary, threatening and confusing interventions. Considerable variation in voting ordinance and practice existed from state to state. Partial uniformity in national voting jurisprudence — or even the exercise of simple duties like jury calls — would await the early 1960s’ federal empowerment to enforce and regulate civic participation laws.
they could learn from states like California and Oregon, which had offered women the vote in 1911 and 1912 respectively; over time, women had learned how to counter obstructive tactics with grassroots preparation, legal challenges, and best of all shaming publicity, supplemented by the League’s *The Woman Citizen*, circulated nationwide.

The new association proved to be less prepared for the reactionary ferocity of the 1920s amidst the new Russian “red scare.” The War Department had secretly placed many suffragist groups under surveillance during World War One because of their championing of pacifism, negotiation, international organizations and disarmament. In 1924 a “Spider Web Chart” circulated among conservative publications and Congressional committees charging that the League and other women’s groups aimed to “disarm America.” To counter isolationist sentiment and vitriolic censure, the League responded energetically in *The Woman Citizen* to explain members’ pro-democratic position. The controversy gradually wound down, only to reappear in Senator Joseph McCarthy’s hearings decades later. The 1920s were proving to be a confrontational period for the League. League chronicler Young would later dryly note that social justice hadn’t been “in season.”

---

20 Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, 451; Dumenil, “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s,” 25; and Young, *In the Public Interest*, 169. Dumenil would judge the “Red Scare” to fundamentally damage women’s reforming potential during the early 1920s. The Spider Web chart had first been published in Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent* in 1924, but had originated in the Chemical Warfare Bureau of the War Department during World War One. The Daughters of the American Revolution and other conservative groups repeatedly targeted “implicated” groups like the League, another suspect being Jane Addams’ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Addams would subsequently win the Nobel Peace Prize for her work within the latter in 1931.

21 Young, *In the Public Interest*, 110.
A structural response

The first several League presidents responded to these travails by focusing on a structure that would enable the League to survive the monsoon. Catt’s visionary modeling of NAWSA to match federal government structure transferred to the new League as it capitalized on existing suffrage branches throughout American communities. 22 But the National League of Women Voters23 was to be a confederated council of state leagues, banded together at their discretion, until authority could be exerted on feisty state chapters buoyed in organization and funding from hard-won suffrage battles. When issues of payment for the new League arose, equity was impractical, since more pliant chapters were insolvent. Moreover, those few with funds wanted to assert themselves on the policy committees, to national office dismay.24

While authority was gradually asserted within the 1920s by League presidents Park and Belle Sherwin to develop rational operation, it was quickly clear that structural matters were of deep importance to members and that fights on these questions would be personal and fierce.25 From 1921-1923, the bulk of powerful state chapters resisted central

---


23 The League was thus named until restructuring in 1944.

24 Young, In the Public Interest, 33, 38; Kay J. Maxwell, “The League of Women Voters Through the Decades” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters booklet, 2007), 3. The League’s first convention produced, in president Park’s words, a “kettle of eels” through undisciplined, personalized introduction of sixty-nine policy goals directly from the convention floor.

25 James G. Hougland Jr. and James R. Wood, “Control in Organizations and the Commitment of Members,” Social Forces 59, no. 1 (September 1980): 85-88. Hougland and Wood profiled League member motivation, observing that while many associations had passive members accepting hierarchical instruction, the League was an exception. Members objected to bossy behavior and cared who got association power. One reason was that “the goals of the League are likely to make democratic ideology particularly salient to members, thereby increasing the rewards of exercising control.” Throughout much of its history, League members have been “prominent” socially, expecting to be respected, heard and accorded standing. As a result of these combined factors, League history is dotted with control struggles judged worth winning.
direction.\textsuperscript{26} Completely reliant on volunteer efforts, impeded in regularizing state incorporation, unable to collect dues from those carrying its name, and addressing a rowdy, shrinking membership, the League risked implosion.

In response to the difficulties encountered by the League, structure took an abrupt turn toward both centralized operation and localized authority in 1944. With assertive action at the highest level through president Marguerite Wells, what most League historians term a legitimate “member revolt” against “non-responsive central [state] leadership” withdrew state charters and refashioned the association as the presently-termed League of Women Voters of the United States.\textsuperscript{27} Henceforth, there would be three tiers — an elected president, a mix of appointed and elected boards of directors and local members, judged to be the core of the organization. Pledging dedication to grassroots engagement at the 1946 re-launch, new president Anna Lord Strauss would urge members to accept more

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{26} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 67-69; and Hilda R. Watrous, “In League with Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and the League of Women Voters, 1921 – 1962” (New York: League of Women Voters of New York State booklet, 1984), 93. From 1921-1923, the bulk of powerful state chapters resisted central direction. Pennsylvania —destined to be a frequent annoyance — seceded from the national council and went its own way. Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey and New York also tended to be self-directed. Within Eleanor Roosevelt’s New York state chapter in 1923, a power fight quickly emerged between the local New York City league and the state level. When the state leadership revised their constitution in favor of controlling city chapter funds, city members left enraged.

\textsuperscript{27} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 1; and Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 10. Percy Maxim Lee, president in the 1950s, later judged that “the Membership itself determined what the League would be.”
responsibility for all tasks.\textsuperscript{28} They responded exuberantly, deluging Congressional offices on behalf of unified goals and bringing the League to new membership life.\textsuperscript{29}

An additional structural shift came in 1954. Indicative of changing fortunes, the fifties had produced a proactive national office with thirty-nine paid employees.\textsuperscript{30} But negotiation of Cold War constraints caused leaders to separate educational and advocacy branches of the organization to facilitate greater independence, adding the League of Women Voters Education Fund to the association’s family of national entities.\textsuperscript{31} The two organizations share the same board of trustees, staff and physical space, examples of the grey divisions supposedly cleansing the non-profit waters. League operation in both branches continues to be highly structured.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{28 Strauss} & was a great-grand-daughter of Lucretia Mott, the Quaker abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights who, together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, authored and delivered the hallowed Declaration of Sentiments in 1848 to their assembled Seneca Falls Convention to launch the American women's suffrage movement. \\
\hline
\textbf{29 Young, In the Public Interest, 1. 1950s president Lee mused decades later that the shift to a League of individual members saved the League from dissolution. The League almost doubled its membership from 1945 (65,000) to 1954 (125,000), in apparent affirmation of the restructuring. \\
\hline
\textbf{30 All officers would continue to be elected volunteers.} \\
\hline
\textbf{31 Young, In the Public Interest, 155. The League of Women Voters was and is technically a nonprofit 501c4 organization, tax-exempt but not tax-deductible due to its advocacy role. Thus in 1957 the League of Women Voters Education Fund was created as a 501c3 organization inviting tax-deductible contributions in support of “citizen education and research” to compliment the advocacy and political engagement of its sister organization yet maintain separate account.} \\
\hline
\textbf{32 League of Women Voters, “League Basics” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters booklet, 2009), 3, 7, 12. All qualifying local Leagues are required to have by-laws consistent with the national office; to stay nonpartisan; to hold annual membership and regular board meetings; to pay a specified portion of membership dues to the state and national levels and have a local solvency plan; to strategize on diverse membership growth and retention; and to act organizationally and individually consistent with League principles. Uniform image is required, though forms of meeting are getting less stringent in a virtual era.} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{League of Women Voters, “League Basics” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters booklet, 2009), 3, 7, 12. All qualifying local Leagues are required to have by-laws consistent with the national office; to stay nonpartisan; to hold annual membership and regular board meetings; to pay a specified portion of membership dues to the state and national levels and have a local solvency plan; to strategize on diverse membership growth and retention; and to act organizationally and individually consistent with League principles. Uniform image is required, though forms of meeting are getting less stringent in a virtual era.} 
\end{table}
Finding purpose

The League’s goals have exhibited remarkable constancy over time. A recent mission statement could have been written in 1920:

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan, political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.\textsuperscript{33}

Yet within these lines, there are influences and target-audiences that clarify just what this civic association has been trying to achieve over the past century.

First, Quaker and Progressive values of social justice, development through education, consensual deliberation, and “missionary zeal for public service,” are intrinsic to its goals, allure and operation.\textsuperscript{34} As the League convened for the first time in 1920, members adopted the 1912 Progressive Party platform as their own. Already receding in political power, the movement’s persuasive methodology, developmental social goals, and optimistic search for a generalized good would be durably preserved within the League and other public interest groups derived from the period.\textsuperscript{35} To enhance deliberation, the League would be distinctive in a partisan-charged era by resolving to stay objective and independent while considering issues, educating its ranks on radical issues without necessarily taking an association stand on them.

\textsuperscript{33} The mission statement is recorded in Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 2.

\textsuperscript{34} Leon Fink, \textit{Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3; and Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 15, 23. Contemplative individualist religious influence was profound for the abolition, suffrage and progressive movements that made women political in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and carried forward to 1920 and beyond. Lucretia Mott was a Unitarian minister; Anthony was a Quaker; Addams was raised Quaker though she became Presbyterian; Paul was a Quaker. Many of the rank-and-file would draw from the same lists.

\textsuperscript{35} McGerr, “Political Style and Women’s Power, 1830-1930,” 864-885.
The League’s Progressive platform has proved to have purposive backbone in it, not just operational style. Through active, even valiant advocacy, it would help transform what had previously been considered women’s “dominion of reform” into the social welfare agenda of future generations, targeting industrial working conditions, child and maternal health improvements, fair wages, housing standards, expanded legal rights, and the pursuit of world peace.\textsuperscript{36} Notable lobbying successes lay ahead, such as the passage of the landmark Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which increased hygiene education for infant and maternity care and inspired future New Deal welfare policy.\textsuperscript{37} With the 1933 beginning of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s four progressively expansive terms in the White House, the League would augment its influence, witnessing the realization of many planks of the 1912 platform.\textsuperscript{38} It is no accident that these achievements coincided with Eleanor Roosevelt, stalwart League member since inception, using her position as First Lady to celebrate the League’s tradition of developmental citizenship through nonpartisan association work.\textsuperscript{39}

An additional consistent purpose has been practical enhancement of the American citizen through association engagement, bridging women’s public and the private lives

\textsuperscript{36} Dumenil, “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s,” 241; and Watrous, “In League with Eleanor,” 3. Birth control would make an early priority list, though it became too contentious by the mid 1920s and was dropped from official consideration.

\textsuperscript{37} Watrous, “In League with Eleanor,” 3. The League’s partner in this effort would be the otherwise conservative General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). The program would exist with federal support until the Great Depression, when funding was allowed to lapse.

\textsuperscript{38} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 40. Most elements of the Progressive Party platform of 1912 became national policy in only slightly modified form by 1945 in spite of the twenties’ cautious delay, a remarkable lobbying achievement testimony to the merits of the long historical view.

\textsuperscript{39} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 84-143; and Watrous, “In League with Eleanor.” In gratitude, Eleanor Roosevelt’s championing of the United Nations (UN) during the 1940s would produce the League’s most massive public relations campaign of its long history, deluging feeble arguments to the contrary in governmental offices throughout the nation.
along the way. Founding leaders had a firm faith in women’s developmental capacity, particularly on the cusp of a yet-unsullied political judgment in 1920. From the start, identity as an “every woman’s association” was sought in order to convert “average” women to rational discourse and energetic citizenship. But League leaders and members have been anything but average. By virtue of accomplishment, origin and attitude, chapters have been vulnerable to elitism and white middle-class bias in spite of the aim to represent a “public interest. In tacit appreciation of Sidney Verba’s focus on those who do participate rather than the characteristics of those who stay away, League leaders in the 1920s saw their best promise in representing organized women. Particularly through the 1950s, the durably limited membership has been a cadre of “the most active, ambitious and politicized of the younger generation.” In some cases, members were transformed in this direction from previous political passivity or ignorance through communal engagement. Faith in ability to improve voter judgment through the provision of solidly researched and debated information remains officially in place, though evidence of public opinion manipulation is not disregarded, a measure of the stubborn optimism and longevity required for the project.

40 Anderson, After Suffrage, 36.
41 Ibid., 35, 44. Women were said to exhibit special ability for moral judgment that might help them engage responsibly in the democratic process.
42 Fink, Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment, 4-5, 24. Fink records Ralph Waldo Emerson’s despair: “The calamity is the masses. I do not wish any mass at all, but honest men only, facultied men only.” The same attitude thrives among earnest women.
44 Young, In the Public Interest, 2.
45 Fink, Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment, 28-31. Fink reviews the John Dewey-Walter Lippman debate during the first quarter of the twentieth century debate between contrived and developmental public opinion formation, arguing that, in his view,
An additional enduring purpose has been the improvement, as opposed to the radical replacement, of democratic institutions, reflecting Progressives’ faith in democratic government to address public problems. In practice, this has translated to literal partnership with civil servants on particular projects, and there is some substance to the “establishment” angle of their traditional “front door lobby.”

At the same time, elements of the League’s social movement origins remain through its readiness to reject the representational status quo and to politicize the American public toward change. In particular, the League would emphasize the need for legitimacy, accountability and citizen responsibility to determine government direction through conscientious use of democratic tools at hand. While the League always rejected partisan support of candidates, it made partisan position preferences clear, supporting in principle the viability of female candidates for advancing progressive social change.

In addition, it refused to settle for future reenactments of 1920 and 1924’s low voter turnout, finding inspirational associational purpose to launch mass media campaigns and civic classes that shifted political culture toward grassroots outreach and institutionalized new relationships between citizen groups and politics.

It would become clear to members that personal motivations to vote could be

Lippman won by virtue of evidence. Catt would consider willful twisting of the public sphere to have been the primary impediment of suffrage.

Cooney, Jr. *Winning the Vote*, 383; and Stuhler, *For the Public Record*, 287. In between 1970 and 1990, a number of past League presidents have ended up working for the White House at an assistant cabinet secretary level.

Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, 447. Seven women were elected to the U.S. Congress by 1928, with bigger gains at the state level. By 1929, almost 150 women served state and local governments. There would be disagreement between the NWP and the League who could be credited with the victories.

Liette Patricia Gidlow, Ph.D., “Getting Out the Vote: Gender and Citizenship in an Age of Consumer Culture,” Ph.D. abstract summary (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997). Gidlow notes that the League’s “Get Out The Vote” drive had a huge effect on 1920s and 1930s political culture, if not yet in the actual numbers of people voting. The League could claim considerable credit for the formation of 3,000 “Get Out the Vote” groups in 46 states in between 1923 and 1928 that focused on publicizing
extremely powerful, and that the League could expand membership and increase turnout through finding connections between people’s private experience and public affairs.49

The importance of style

Seemingly conciliatory and tame compared to more radical groups like the NWP and the National Organization for Women (NOW), League members exhibited certitude from the start that both inward respectability and outward respect would best suit the achievement of organizational goals. Historians are increasingly aware that style can lend critical vigor or malaise to membership associations, calling for exploration of these deliberate choices to comprehend such organizations’ allure and impact.50

While drawing from exceedingly earnest forbears within egalitarian social movements, the League’s style is more pragmatic, pursuing otherwise quixotic dreams through astute political organizing.51 Its nonpartisan style is prone to public misunderstanding, since it may imply objectivity but also presents savvy long-term strategy; partisan alliance can backfire.52 Members have found their best tools to be deep voting rights and providing education on the elections. Gidlow argues this activity set in place a new relationship between citizen groups and politics.

49 Anderson, After Suffrage, 35.

50 Dumenil, “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s,” 879, 885. Dumenil has contended that organizational selection of style was critical to the historical success of the suffrage movement via NAWSA’s mass scale popular persuasion and likewise crippled political efficacy of newly enfranchised women in 1920 via the League’s assumption of nonpartisan objectivity at a moment of political opportunity.


52 Young, In the Public Interest, 20. The class example is when prominent NAWSA members supported ex-President Teddy Roosevelt, the single pro-suffrage candidate, in 1912. When he failed to win the Republican nomination for president or, as a Progressive, the general election, it would take eight more years and considerable courting of a harried and resentful President Wilson to win the vote.
knowledge of democratic institutions and issues, combined with consistent display of the scruples for which they’re known. These standards can frustrate and disable the League among people playing by different rules. But time and again, politicians have underestimated the League’s endurance and reputable force. A 1954 observer captured the steely style behind polite demeanor of those who volunteer for the League experience:

Even when they are sneered at as a bunch of ladies’ sewing societies, the League of Women Voters takes no offense. They just keep on needling politicians, influencing history, fighting the things they fear: dishonesty and bad faith.

Like other associations and the social movements that can drive them, League members have managed adversity through friendship, shared values and pooled resources. With resources scant, style can be minimalist, but it is always social. Recent scholars have found American women’s clubs profoundly empowering, helping women bond and develop together in “safe haven” to improve shared condition. Indeed, Karen J. Blair concludes that “from clubs, seemingly tame in contrast to more militant types of activism, are created women leaders for positions of influence . . . . Moderate behavior can deceive outsiders, who might cling to suspicion that women’s groups cannot incubate meaningful changes.” The

53 Young, In the Public Interest, 27; Roberta Francis, “Changed Forever: The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters Education Fund booklet, 1988), 35. Catt had learned from forty years of suffrage campaigning that “a minute minority of well-placed political leaders could frustrate an overwhelming preponderance of informed opinion,” referring to Elihu Root, President Wilson’s Secretary of State and earlier the bane of NAWSA’s existence. League leaders of 1970’s ERA battles in the 1970s later recalled how they were patronized and ridiculed when lobbying for women’s rights, then welcomed with praise when returning to the same offices on behalf of safer topics, concluding that they had been used, lied to, defied and, on that occasion, outmaneuvered.


55 Ibid., 98; and The DC Voter: A Voice for Citizens, A Force for Change 86, no. 9 (November 2010), 6. While League functions featured “tea” in earlier days, they presently feature “green bags” instead, in spirit of the work ethic and principles members embrace and the paltry sums available for their completion.

public face of feminism can be misleading. Stolid appearing League members have built an impressive record of legislative success and transformation of public opinion. "Far from peripheral to the boisterous women's rights advocates of the era, the League . . . cloaked its rebels . . . to be a congenial forum for change." While more contentious feminists would dismissively underestimate League potential, considerable history supports the verdict that quiet, polite activists can be more effective than flamboyant ones.

The League conscientiously steers its voice toward middle ground in the national policy conversation. President during the League's lagging efforts to integrate blacks in the 1950s, Lee rationalized inaction by noting, "The League cannot be a law unto itself . . . . It must not run too fast for its contemporaries of the American electorate to keep up . . . . It must in other words want the things that other reasonable American citizens want," edging a maximum diversity toward progressive goals. Effort has been made to avoid alienating mainstream voters (or, even worse, members). On occasion, the National office

---


58 Karen J. Blair, "Introduction" in "Special Issue on Women's Clubs," x. Blair's point is in reference to Melissa Estes Blair's research.

59 Melissa Estes Blair, "A Dynamic Force in Our Community," 39-40. One example is the League's highly effective campaign on behalf of women's rights in the 1960s and 1970s in southern states like North Carolina, made publicly non-threatening in familiar stodgy vehicles like the League and the YWCA. Blair contends, "League of Women Voters women saw their letters and lobbying efforts as countering both the outsider agitator image of the National Organization for Women and the emotional appeals of organized anti-ERA women." Yet together, these two incompatible styles could complement and narrowly miss significant victory; the two organizations continue to work together on specific issues.


61 Young, *In the Public Interest*, 75. Young refers to Park's sense that positioning the League in the mainstream would help it progress the nation's attitudes gradually and with less opposition.

62 Olivier, "The League of Frightened Women," 102. Olivier recorded his understanding that it was these mainstream voters Lee hoped would respond to the League's voter education efforts.
has exhibited conservative, hesitant tendencies in comparison to local League activists, who in private have challenged national policies on matters like the ERA. But while some activists term the League as staid and conservative, the charge is generally not appropriate. Mainstream may be the style, but historically it has not been the goal, since it has consistently supported the 1912 and 1924 Progressive Party platforms’ visionary range.

The League as an organization has become adept at surviving adversity. Loyal members have repeatedly been “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” that the public is private-focused in spite of their best efforts, that citizens have frequently chosen not to learn about the issues, and that they have ignored energetic League reminders to show at the polls on voting day. Leaguers have learned to steel themselves to defeat or under-appreciation of particular efforts, protecting resolve to continue education and advocacy efforts in the hope next time would be different. That “the next time” has presented itself for more than ninety-one years is testimony to canny weathering of volatile political developments.

Developing through process

When state chapters were fighting over their “kettle of eels” in the 1920s, they were essentially scrapping over means versus ends. They were in good company, as the country


64 Young, *In the Public Interest*, 20, 45.

65 Stuhler, *For the Public Record*, 292.

66 Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 5. Sayre has challenged Dumenil’s criticism of the League’s nonpartisan choice, arguing that the move saved the women’s movement from being imprisoned within party bureaucracy. She also points out that the League has shifted from emphasizing its educative role in conservative eras to asserting advocacy in times of greater progressive promise, helping it survive to meet the needs of future generations officially unchanged despite its generally recognized liberal leanings.
weighed efficient government through technocrats versus populist mayhem through class-surging democracy. The League’s identity would crystallize and calm as Belle Sherwin, elected president in 1924, realized means could be the end itself through a focus on developmental process. New women voters needed information for “improved” judgment and engagement. League members needed a focus that would inspire longevity. Looking beyond the fray, she concluded that “the [agenda] program is the thing,” made legitimate through its evolution from local members and unifying through the consensual process of its formation. In the process, League identity would derive from shared function and purpose, launching a series of civic manuals that continue to be their trademark product. The League chapters’ educational focus would enable connection with each member surpassing the value of the information itself through activating their inquiry and loyal participation. Members would take great pride in these proceedings, judging them of sufficient external as well as internal importance to justify careful cataloguing that would by 1950 produce the largest single non-governmental-organization paper acquisition of the U.S. Library of Congress (LOC).

The year of record transferal coincided with a maturation of process that was durably grassroots in origin. The manner of decision-making would “give the training —

67 If only the rest of the country had drawn the same conclusion!

68 Young, In the Public Interest, 64.

69 Ibid., 82.

70 Stuhler, For the Public Record, 220. This observation was made by subsequent president Strauss.

71 Young, In the Public Interest. Public access to the 277 separate collections of correspondence, meetings, reports, articles, and audio materials is attainable at the U.S. Library of Congress. The extent of the collection is, according to Young — one of the LOC archivists — testimony to the objective historical value accorded their proceedings.
challenging in itself — to fit the citizen to serve in the public interest through painstaking deliberative exploration within the local Leagues and subsequent national negotiation among positions to produce unified programs. The basic League concept of “study – member agreement – action” would apply to how meetings were run, agendas were reached, debates were handled, and public meetings and materials were handled.

Grassroots consensus is a key element of that programmatic equation. Sayre notes its distinctive evolution from suffragist Quaker influences.

Consensus does not mean that every member has to agree with every action or conclusion of discussions. It means everyone has a chance to speak if she or he chooses to and [that] those of opposing opinion to the general view feel they have their day in court even if the final consensus differs from their view. It is not a vote but a sense that there is general agreement and that there is a willingness to accept . . . the sense of the group . . . . It ideally involves a group process of learning, particularly learning to listen and respond to the opinions of others.

Such valuation of equal opportunity for expression, listening and consideration on mutually fair terms is also integral to current modeling of deliberative democracy, which shares derivation from the Progressive thought which brought it to flower.

Consensual process may emerge from the ground up, but its destination is theoretically skyward for national representation. Debate is constantly underway to decide matters large or small. Stringent advocacy standards exist, and expressively-motivated members take their responsibilities seriously to exhaustively consider all subjects in appropriate fashion. Along the way, local Leagues and national staff undergo intense self-

---

72 Stuhler, For the Public Record, 244.

73 Young, In the Public Interest, 82.

74 Maxwell, “The League of Women Voters Through the Decades,” 2.

75 Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 27.

study to reconfigure methodology and interpersonal dynamic, yet another debate. The League’s commitment to thorough consensual process may by deliberative standards be admirable, but it is also “ponderous” and, to outsiders, interminable.77

There are practical limits to the League's consensual process. It must be funded at local chapter expense, affecting uniform depth. Viable at the local level, it can be counterproductive at biennial national conventions, where hierarchy reemerges.78 League materials note that “speaking with one voice” is important to effectiveness and unity at the National League level.79 More lobbying freedom comes to members as individuals; those acting on official League capacity are literally on bought time and require specific authorization and script.80 Finally, there are limits to the League’s consensual quality when issues get really thorny. Some analysts question the League’s ability to produce substantive decisions that are truly representative of either the diversity of its membership or a

77 Fink, Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment, 18; Stuhler, For the Public Record, viii-xiv; Gloria Feldt, No Excuses: Nine Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010), 38. As Progressive mentor John Dewey believed, the thoroughness that issues from time and effort permits a process which unveils truth as “less a form of discovery than a form of association and communication in the solving of practical problems,” discovering an approximation of the public interest along the way. Gloria Feldt, past-president of Planned Parenthood and ex- League member, would come to consider this process busy-work that missed the urgency of cause.

78 Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 13, 33. Locals members appoint delegates to represent their views at the national convention. Policy-making draws from conventions held every two years. In the meantime, the national League is directed by its board and a council that features each state chapter. The best motivation to accurately represent local sentiment is peer approval.

79 League of Women Voters, “League Basics,” 32. State and local chapters are asked to restrain themselves from varying national positions once advocacy positions are in motion for two-year periods.

80 Ibid., 22; and League of Women Voters, “Creating a More Perfect Union: League of Women Voters Annual Report 2007-2008” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters report, 2009). The reference relates to monitoring from the Internal Revenue Service. Current lobbying vehicles include the National Lobby Corps (started just prior to the ERA push in 1971), using nominated Washington, DC-area members for practicality, though briefed by professional advocacy staff; the email alert system termed the Grassroots Lobby Corps, that provokes widespread national member advocacy on priority legislative issues; and online advocacy tools provided through all levels of League websites to educate and inspire activism on purposive issues.
rigorously intellectual “public interest,” suggesting most critically that the elaborate process doesn’t produce viable political choices because of the slowness of the wheel.\textsuperscript{81}

Who wants to join

Joining motivations are frequently earnestly purposive, social and — according to John Mark Hansen — “particularly sensitive to changes in income and fashion.” \textsuperscript{82} People have tended to sign up when they were concerned, suggesting the health of the League can thrive at points of societal trouble through expressive protection of threatened values.\textsuperscript{83}

Those generally white, educated and socially-prominent white women who considered signing up through the 1960s would observe that volunteers were expected to plunge in with vigor and personal funds, yet they saw exciting developmental and purposive opportunities to compensate.\textsuperscript{84} Ethnic and class diversity was less bridging that the good intentions brought to bear with the predictably progressive personal views representing both established parties. Eleanor Roosevelt provides a well-known example of the small yet intense cadre of early members. She first got involved in 1920 at friends’ suggestion, shyly

\textsuperscript{81} Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 13; and Olivier, “The League of Frightened Women,” 101. For example, in the midst of the civil rights crisis in 1954, it could take years for the League to arrive at a policy position, compromising its nonpartisan position through selective inaction. But once the consensual wheel does lodge in gear, it can be a uniquely powerful lobbying force, for example in the push for a UN toward the close of World War Two.

\textsuperscript{82} John Mark Hansen, “The Political Economy of Group Membership,” The American Political Science Review 79, no. 1 (March 1985): 88, 90. Hansen observes that League membership tends to increase by 5% in presidential election years, indicating heightened public awareness of its national voter education role as well as national unease during the cycle.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 90; and Robert H. Salisbury, “An Exchange Theory of Groups,” Midwest Journal of Political Science 13, no. 1 (February 1969): 1-32. Hansen acknowledges the power of Salisbury’s expressive participation analysis, indicating that the joining benefit for League members comes in its ready-made process as worrisome expression of individual values.

\textsuperscript{84} Young, In the Public Interest, 15, 76. Volunteers in 1924 were trained to be impartial recorders of positions and facts on elections as part of the Voters Service, improving the science of democratic politics. The League in this chapter was near bankrupt, so subsidy of any form was out of the question. This reliance on personal funds limited who got involved to those who could spare the time and often featured help at home.
inaugurating a public life that would begin tentatively on the League’s New York Chapter Legislation Committee, then proceed to its New York Board of Directors in 1922 and bloom with her chairing of the National Platform Committee on Social Legislation in 1924. She would then veer toward the national Democratic Party’s committee structure in 1928 while maintaining active League membership in a non-leadership capacity (befitting her increasingly partisan national position), becoming supreme welfare lobbyist within her husband’s presidential terms. Gertrude Weil provides a slightly different version of an early League activist. First president of the nascent North Carolina chapter of the League in 1920 and daughter of German immigrants to the U.S., she was concurrently active in the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs, the North Carolina Association of Jewish Women and other groups associated with women’s and Jewish causes. The League would prove an effective civic entry point for generations of immigrants to come.

A tangible sense of reforming purpose infused gradually multiplying members during the Roosevelt administration. Genevieve B. Earl exemplified indomitable zeal, serving within the New Deal as private volunteer, social worker, Minority Leader of the New York City Council and head of the Brooklyn League Chapter. Reflecting the League’s emerging emphasis on grassroots activism, she felt engagement within city administration presented the great civic need of the time:

85 For information on Eleanor Roosevelt’s rich engagement with the League of Women Voters, refer to Watrous, “In League with Eleanor.” While in the White House, Roosevelt touted the League as a great source of nonpartisan information gathering and dispersal. She stayed faithful to the positions she had gained through League membership, particularly concerned about the need for ongoing voter education in a complex needs-pressed democracy. Like other League members, she preferred incremental means to influence yet not impersonate improved women’s status; such moderation is moment-specific, since her positions remain durably ambitious in an historical context. After her husband died, she was made the first UN Delegate representing the United States, to her former associational colleagues’ thrill and durable energetic support.

The fight for good government, while a winning one, is never permanently won. It must be waged afresh each day. To keep eternally at this job is an act of faith and courage . . . . [But] the job of being an alert citizen is exciting, relatively easy and wholly rewarding.\textsuperscript{87}

With the 1946 reorganization to a grassroots member-based organization, the next decade doubled the local League members who responded to a call for further-heightened engagement and responsibility.\textsuperscript{88} Accepting menial along with lofty assignments, they plunged into the distribution of leaflets, circulation of petitions, and voter registration drives that supplemented program meetings. While failing to transform the League toward greater solvency, these dedicated volunteers provided sufficient hours and dues to lift operations toward a new diversified level, in the process gaining deep personal satisfaction from their association with its golden era.\textsuperscript{89}

Beginning in the mid-1950s, membership would be significantly impacted by the civil rights and women’s movements. But the transformation would lodge less in identity than in advocacy shifts and availability for traditional functions. The League’s wide structural reach within far-flung communities preselected by degree those who would become active in the emerging crusades, enabling wider association-level engagement in


\textsuperscript{88} Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 10.

\textsuperscript{89} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 155; and Helen P. Gouldner, “Dimensions of Organizational Commitment,” \textit{Administrative Science Quarterly} \textbf{4}, no. 4 (March 1960): 472. Gouldner examined member commitment during this highpoint of League membership and found very high commitment to the League across membership. Long hours in preparation, meetings and civic efforts gave solid testimony to civic joiner tendencies. Officers tended to effectively sign their lives over to the cause, slightly distrustful of the “outsiders” who preserved the right to engage in other organizations as well to the reduction of League time. Those most vulnerable to leaving were philosophically supportive but activity-wise distant.
social movements than otherwise possible. But gradually, people with slightly different world-views had new motivation to join, contributing to 1969’s surging membership to an all-time high. Given Theda Skocpol’s observation that many chapter-based membership federations dramatically lost membership during the civil and woman’s rights movements, the League’s relatively steady membership throughout those storms is testimony to its resilient reputation for democratic engagement and social change.

But the 1960s and 1970s produced more distinctive change with women’s return to work and education. While standard profiling could mostly apply in 1972, volunteer roles began to change in response to widespread female departure from home-life for competing demands from work, school and politics. In response to this very relevant shift for most membership associations, League tasks were combined and responsibility was diluted; passive dues-paying members became officially acceptable. The League tilted toward new life as a professional life enhancer to complement its civic purposes, carrying forward the traditional non-working volunteers as well, though in slightly muted form as their ages rose and numbers began to dwindle. In so doing, it actively competed with other feminist associations for members.

---

90 Melissa Estes Blair, “A Dynamic Force in Our Community,” 30. As Blair has pointed out, “conducting feminist action through existing groups determined who would and would not participate in public feminist action in one Southern town.” (Italics added.)

91 Theda Skocpol, Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 154-55. From 1955 – 1995, GFWC lost 83.1% in membership; the Masons lost 69.8%.

92 Young, In the Public Interest, 156-57. Trends otherwise continued toward educated, suburban, largely white, middle-aged, married, hyper-committed volunteers.

93 Stuhler, For the Public Record, 289; and Costain, “Representing Women,” 108-109. Age divided associational choices at ERA’s 1982 close, with 93% of League members over 39 and 72% of NOW members younger than 35.

94 Hansen, “The Political Economy of Group Membership,” 89. Hansen later contended the League won that competition, particularly for civic activists adverse to radicalism or stridency. “The
Yet by 2011, members continue to attend meetings across the U.S., contributing to a viable if waning presence in American civic life. Characterization has shifted only slightly. Recent webpage profiles include a former National Board president from Albuquerque, whose civic impulse as lawyer and federal civil servant led her to the League because of the Hatch Act; a Japanese-American, who resolved her World War Two detention experience through acknowledging the seriousness of League efforts to improve America; a recent immigrant to Delaware invited by one of her citizenship sponsors; an Oregon housewife whose research work for the League qualified her to work as a local investigative journalist; a young mother from Minnesota who joined to have meaningful social engagement despite diapers; and an entrepreneur from California who found her League membership instrumental to a rise in city politics and black community activism.

Those who join expect to directly lobby Congress following careful study of the issues. They are likely to be moderately progressive in their views, and are unlikely to

---

95 Peter Levine, *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 58. Levine observed in 1994 that “just 2.8% of the [U.S. population] said that they were members of some groups like the League of Women Voters, or some other group . . . interested in better government.”

96 Stuhler, *For the Public Record*, i-vii; and League of Women Voters, “League Basics,” 3. Members continue to be well-educated, generally women (though men have been invited since 1974), middle-class, appreciative of citizen rights, and resolved for change. Many work or are retired. Eligible voting members must be citizens and at least 19 years old.


98 Anne N. Costain, “The Struggle for a National Women’s Lobby: Organizing a Diffuse Interest,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (December 1980): 484-486; and David Vogel, “The Public Interest Movement and the American Reform Tradition,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (Winter 1980-1981), 614. As indication of their lobbying enthusiasm, the League and the Sierra Club both had their 501c3 status revoked because of excessive lobbying in the early 1970s. “Substantial” was viewed at that time as anything more than 10%. They have since learned to be more protective
attract conservatives to their consensual exploration. While the League originally featured a healthy balance of Republicans and Democrats in its membership, the increasing national polarization of conservative versus centric politics gives some credence to the possibility that most members vote Democratic or independent, and even that conservatives might feel socially ostracized as members. Some charge that this membership characteristic compromises the officially nonpartisan League stance, categorizing the League as a predictable liberal interest group.

Where the numbers go

In some ways, membership scale has stayed frozen in time — until one recalls the relative growth in the American population and recent catapulting launch of particularized group millions. Four years into the League's existence in 1924, membership had settled to 100,000, disappointing to Catt, who had hoped to sustain suffrage activism. Numbers of the League's nonprofit status in the delivery of the same function. Lobbying limitations for non-profits were liberalized to 20% in 1976. While the League benefited in theory, so did associations with greater financial resources and arguably fewer scruples.


100 Young records a comment of Park, the League's first president: “The League had chosen [in its first five years] to be a ‘middle of the road’ organization in which persons of widely different political views might work together [on] a program of definite advance . . . to lead many women a little way at a time.” Young, In the Public Interest, 75.

101 Sayre comments, “this [liberal tendency] may affect the degree to which League consensus discussions really capture significantly dissenting viewpoints, as well as implications for possible selectivity of membership.” Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 6.

102 For example, the Foundation for Education Reform and Accountability, itself a lobbying group of conservative orientation, charged in February 2011 that the League of Women Voters New York was locally biased in favor of teachers' unions, with opposition to “school choice” and “property tax limits” the likely product of regular, “undisclosed” donations from the New York State United Teachers Union. See http://www.nyfera.org/?p=3161 (accessed 2/17/11).

103 For information on membership shifts, refer to Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 9-10; Young, In the Public Interest, 148, 153, 179; Stuhler, For the Public Record, 247-249, 264, 271, 289; and Chappell, “Rethinking Women’s Politics in the 1970s,” 157.
dropped alarmingly with the jazz age and Great Depression, reaching 41,000 in 1934; the League was forced to rely almost entirely on volunteers and insist on localism because of national shortfalls. But those members like Roosevelt who stayed were highly loyal, active and capable, compensating for sisters who abandoned progressive cause. With the launch of the New Deal, the fortunes of the League shifted. Surviving the restructuring toward local League membership that began in 1944, membership had returned to 62,000 by 1946. Rosters climbed by 1950 to 93,000, then 106,000 in 1952 and 125,000 in 1954, and both local Leagues and national profile spread throughout the country. Through the Kennedy administration, joining figures reflected an elective enthusiasm toward League engagement, personally promoting democracy and the “free world” through civic values.

Yet in this season of great public respect and visibility, the League budget was extremely tight, operating, for example, at $210,212 during fiscal year 1952-53. Drawing from local League tithes, national leaders felt the need to pinch both pencils and policy fights. As a result, president Lee would lay low in the 1950s in a period of principled civil rights promise to avoid losing members and funds yet bravely risked official

---


105 Stuhler, For the Public Record, 247, 264. Stuhler considers 1950 to be the League’s highpoint of visibility and respect. Shortly after that year, George Gallup would term the League “the greatest civic army of all time.”

106 Clare, “Resisting ‘the Doldrums,’” 201-207. Membership in the North Carolina state league had declined throughout the 1920s, reaching 100 people by 1931. Five years later it officially disbanded, reopening in 1951 at the behest of several women who considered the League the best available model for civic-inclined women. Seeking advice from Lee on how to address the question of race — highly relevant in North Carolina given its role within the lunch-counter sit-in movement then developing — they were told to hedge black requests for membership and focus on retaining white membership. The League resisted taking a stand on civil rights and integration into its own ranks when the Supreme Court issued its decision Brown versus Board of Education in 1954. Clare finds this position tantalizingly disappointing in the context of both North Carolina and the country at large.
condemnation when she testified against McCarthy in 1955.\textsuperscript{107} The inconsistent approach seemed to pay off in terms of national reputation, but did little to accelerate association growth. By 1962, Senator George Aiken, Republican of Vermont, would famously exclaim: “‘Only 135,000 of them? I thought there were millions!’”\textsuperscript{108}

In 1969, membership reached an historic high, with 156,780 members and 1,300 local Leagues. But the period of growth was ending and membership began to decline at variable rates, causing League presidents to ponder unseemly recruitment and passive membership.\textsuperscript{109} A decade later, in spite of a waxing ERA campaign and unprecedented fundraising, membership had declined by 14% — not as extreme as the GFWC’s near-extinction during the period, but disquieting to exhausted members nevertheless.\textsuperscript{110} Yet while the League’s numbers tilted south, more radical feminist groups were not the ones to pick up the slack in the materialist 1980’s.\textsuperscript{111} League numbers began to climb back in defiance of the earlier trend (perhaps reflecting eventual concern with societal direction),

\textsuperscript{107} Maxwell, “The League of Women Voters Through the Decades,” 5. Lee testified to Congress, “I believe tolerance and respect for the opinions of others is being jeopardized by men and women whose instincts are worthy patriotic, but whose minds are apparently unwilling to accept the necessity for dissent within a democracy.” With her support, the League had begun the 1950s with community education programs on civil liberties and federal loyalty policies, and officially advocated enhanced protection of individual rights.

\textsuperscript{108} Stuhler, \textit{For the Public Record}, 247.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 265-289. Through the mid-1960s, leaders placed more importance on developing the League’s famous program than in filling a room to consider it. But by 1980 one commented, “we have engaged in too much self-flagellation during the last two years over the undeniable fact that women are going back to work and to schools in every increasing numbers. The trend has become part of our rationale for decreasing membership and recruitment difficulties. I do not believe the volunteer is disappearing but that the \textit{role of the volunteer is changing significantly}.” (Italics added.)

\textsuperscript{110} Francis, “Changed Forever,” 25. Francis calculates that the League raised $2.5 million in all manner of ways to fund the ten-year fight. But the effort left the membership exhausted and frustrated.

\textsuperscript{111} Costain, “The Struggle for a National Women’s Lobby,” 483. While NOW’s membership shot up from slightly over 1,000 in 1970 to 35,000 in 1974 and 40,000 in the latter 1970s, its numbers had returned to 35,000 by 1980 in spite of the ratification drive.
and returned by 2009 to 110,000 “members.” Increasingly, the word “member” is less associated with League strength than “supporter” (see Appendix 3). In 2011, the League claims 140,000 “supporters” and more than 800 Leagues in all 50 states. 

As a percentage of national population, League national numbers have always remained small, constituting 0.00087% in 1924, descending to 0.00032% in 1935, bouncing back to 0.00077% in 1969, and returning to 0.00036% in 2005. The striking resilience of the League’s membership relative to the General Federation of Women’s Club’s plunging decline from 0.14021% in 1924 to 0.00032% in 2011 is striking in its comparative consistency. Curiously, its national percentage trends are quite similar to its ex-Spider Web enemy, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR, whose exclusive criteria and nativist advocacy make it the antithesis of a bridging organization despite affiliation with democratic past); DAR’s members as a percentage of national population stayed just above the League’s curve from 1924 to the present (though missing the League’s descent during the Depression years). Comparative material on membership trends relative to national population of the League, the GFWC and DAR is presented in graphic form in Appendix 1 of this thesis, making clear the commonality in numbers with DAR and difference from those of GFWC. More detailed graphic depiction of the League’s membership trends relative to population totals is found in Appendix 2, indicating more clearly the League’s varying fortunes over time.

---

112 Nancy Tate, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 20, 2011.

In-house historians continue to view the League as “the leading civic organization in the United States.” Its membership and staff have maneuvered the new digital age with dexterity. Practical steps have been taken to combine local Leagues, host virtual meetings, and become flexible in a volunteer-disparaged world. A current Membership Recruitment Initiative aims to draw “recently retired women ages 50-65, who are looking for civic engagement opportunities.” In the spirit of Kenneth Andrews and Marshall Ganz’s advice to public interest associations, the League is training volunteer leaders of the future through the Ruth Shor Fellows program, established by bequest in 2009. In spite of recent efforts to recruit minorities, the League has remained predominantly white. But its impact has spread beyond the suburbs with the posting of voter education, issue assessment and advocacy work online. During electoral seasons, it increasingly allies with


115 League of Women Voters, “Opening Doors to Democracy: League of Women Voters 2008-2009 Annual Report” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters report, 2010). “While economic realities demanded that the League find new ways to communicate with members, train staff and carry out other essential activities in 2009, we saw this as an opportunity to adopt new technologies to complement and strengthen our work. From putting videos about judicial independence on YouTube to using Facebook as part of our advocacy in support of the League’s position on health care reform, this year the League was on the cutting edge of online education and activism.”

116 Gittel and Shtob, “Changing Women’s Roles in Political Volunteerism and Reform of the City,” S77. For years, League activists had been lauded for improving women through volunteer association engagement, but they found themselves slammed fifty years later by NOW for demeaning women through encouraging unpaid service.


119 Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” 10. In 2002, 5% of League members were “of color,” though the numbers would increase marginally in chapters containing greater geographic diversity.
minority activation groups to increase turnout, perhaps solidifying conservative readiness
to steer clear of its recruitment drives.\textsuperscript{120}

In the midst of membership constraints and internet-impacted reduction in
publication sales, the National League’s budget rose from $2.6 million during the 1990s to
$6,560,476 in fiscal year 2007-2008.\textsuperscript{121} This enlarged budget may allow for greater
programmatic impact on a national level, but it is also increasingly allocated to
fundraising.\textsuperscript{122} Membership fees have stayed constant, in appreciation of members’
frequently fixed incomes; officials remain volunteers and staff salaries continue to be
modest. The League’s expanded presence and budget are thus highly vulnerable to
wobbling local league tithes, member donor fatigue and grant competition for the
foundations known to support civic associations.\textsuperscript{123} Even post-“Citizens United,” rendered
by the Supreme Court in 2010, foundations are careful in their selection of civic education

\textsuperscript{120} For example, the League hosted “Beyond Election Day: Young People Getting Involved in
Democracy” in Washington, DC on October 28, 2010, featuring presentations by the National
Coalition on Black Civic Participation, the Pew Hispanic Center and the Student Association for Voter
Empowerment.

\textsuperscript{121} League of Women Voters, “Creating a More Perfect Union: League of Women Voters
2007-2008 Annual Report.”

\textsuperscript{122} League of Women Voters, “Opening Doors to Democracy: League of Women Voters 2008-
2009 Annual Report.” During FY 2008-2009, fundraising represented 62\% of supporting services
and about 20\% of total program expenditure.

\textsuperscript{123} Warren, Democracy and Association, 164; “Capital Research Group,”
http://www.capitalresearch.org/news/news.html?id=431 (accessed 2/17/11); and
http://www.lwv.org (accessed 9/15/11). The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Kettering Foundation, the
Kaiser Family Foundation and the Joyce Foundation are dedicated to developing and improving
public dialogue, among other aims. The League has uneven success winning their funds, in spite of its
long record as a public interest group. Community foundations are consistent prospects, but tend to
provide modest grants that pale in comparison to the larger funds they bestow on particular targets
like La Raza. Corporate foundations are better sources of voter education efforts and issue studies.
Advocacy is supported by groups like the Open Society Institute, especially when allied with other
“good government” groups like Common Cause and the Sunshine Project, and tends to be challenged
immediately by well-funded groups on the other side of the ideological spectrum. Additional funds
come as corporate matching gifts via employee designation and in-kind services provided by “affinity
partners” for teleconferencing and internet technology in return for widened market exposure.
grantees; such activity can affect elections and, depending on the orientation of the courts, be charged with partisan effect.124

Some of the most needy competition comes from the League's own ranks.125 Several chapters have impressive revenue and reserves, such as for “Centre County's” $2,533,086 and $4,123,887 respectively for 2009, but others are unprepared for recession shortfall, like “Jefferson County” with yearly revenue of $20,429 and paltry reserves.126 These financial numbers combine with decreasing membership to reduce the total national number of local Leagues. In 1969, there were 1,300 chapters. By 2008, the number had shifted to 850, and by 2011 there are 800. As a consequence, meetings continue to focus on civic concerns but with a survival edge that suggests vulnerable awareness of aging League communities.127 In spite of the League's “most valuable asset” — its dedicated members, whose generous volunteering has conferred “clout, visibility and credibility” to the League for ninety-one years — the future is unlikely to become promising unless a stirring advocacy cause can be found, similar to the UN or the ERA, that diversifies the age and derivative of its

124 Dorothy S. Ridings, “From the President: Perspective,” Foundation News and Commentary 39, no. 4 (July/August 1998). Ridings, President and CEO of the Council on Foundations, reported in 1998 that it was difficult though not impossible for foundations to make civic education grants. She urged clarification of the rules to permit more foundations to strengthen democratic engagement via the League’s traditional path.

125 Local Leagues are required to ask permission of state leagues (who in turn must ask the national office on their own behalf) regarding approaches to foundations or corporations whose boundaries extend beyond the local jurisdiction. See "President's Handbook: Financial Guidelines" issued on August 2010 by the LWV of Illinois Education Fund, accessed through http://www.lwvil.org (accessed 9/17/11).

126 “Centre” and “Jefferson” 2009 figures are derived from the National Center for Charitable Statistics. See http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/search.php (accessed 2/17/11). By comparison, the League of Women Voters of Washington, DC has a healthy budget of $38,580 for FY 2011, though it projects a need to draw $8,000 from reserves in anticipation of dues and donation shortfalls. See "League of Women Voters of the District of Columbia Proposed Budget 2011-2012," as submitted to the LWVDC Annual meeting on April 16, 2011.

membership. Chapter 4 will explore whether the dire condition of American democracy can produce such a cause, and to what extent the League’s sustained efforts on its behalf may remain unsung.

CHAPTER 4

RENDERING “CONGENIAL” CHANGE: CONSIDERING THE LEAGUE’S DEMOCRATIC IMPACT

Political experts frequently comment on a radical divide between how democracy should occur and what it presents in practice. But theorists and practitioners of democratic process and citizen engagement tend to set the League of Women Voters aside as an unusual exception to this rule, suggesting its practical operation meets ideal standards of democratic citizenry and encourages improved governmental performance. (Acknowledgments of this sentiment by Mark E. Warren, Robert D. Putnam, John Mark Hansen and Michael Schudson are cited in Chapter 2.) Why such judgments are made, and whether they will hold up in a more general political court, is the subject of this chapter.

Chapter 2 explored measures of a democratically beneficial public interest association. Such active membership can in theory provide schooling for democracy through active membership; represent interest; improve informed participation and outcome acceptance through fair rules of procedure; empower collective action on public problems; foster polite interpersonal dialogue through experiencing pluralism; enable bridging membership and social trust to achieve that reach; balance representative voice of otherwise excluded citizens; utilize internal democratic structure to enhance legitimate representation and strengthen personal effectiveness; and contribute to shared values of citizenry.

Chapter 2 also describes Warren’s socio-cultural attributes of ideal civic associations. In addition to the social trust, which bridges pluralism and develops respect for the rule of law already described, he argues that “dispositions that underwrite the

---

democratic process” require good faith in deliberation and attending to a common good.² He judges such “democratic associational ecology” a fairly impossible standard for American associations of either public or private orientation. Indeed, any human instrument will have its failings. The more useful focus for this thesis is how the League ranks on the combined measures relative to general association trends of professionalization, partisanship, passivity, inequality and exclusion. Relevant criteria will include whether it can make contestation more equitable through focus on procedure and engagement; encourage at least a portion of America’s “combinations” to represent “enlarged perspective” through issue-specific alliance;³ uncover commonality amidst fraying democratic values yet protect diversity; and achieve a measure of purposive success amidst declining membership and surging private representation. Evaluating the extent of such impact will uncover a range of performance that reflects the extent of societal challenge more than a judgment of internal failure. Yet resting on molding laurels will not help the League revive as a grassroots membership organization or lonely herald of democratic engagement. Critical internal examination of its successes and limitations on representing interest, playing by established rules, embracing difference, balancing ends versus means, and threading forward its gender-influenced advocacy might help it sustain its democratic record.

Training for democratic engagement

The first marker involves whether League membership helps people experience pluralism. Warren has suggested civic associations are less stratified in theory than those requiring particular qualifications, thus containing bridging potential to enlarge democratic


³ Ibid., 156. Warren references Hannah Arendt’s “plus-sum resolutions,” also termed “enlarged perspectives.”
spirit. But the League’s membership has never been an accurate cross-section of American society. In general, it is durably white, middle-class, female, and reform-inclined, already disposed by degree toward civic life. Increasingly, its membership features professionals, a decided change from past eras when volunteerism presented the principle civic path available to women. Its strongest contemporary claim for asserting the experience of pluralism comes in its wide-ranging purposive agenda. As Sidney Verba has indicated, there are times when people of one class can develop a capacity to represent the interests of another. As a result of past experience and present principle, League members increasingly address issues that pertain to a wide population, conscientiously balancing cross-class interests in presentation of policy options. Active advocacy is often on behalf of disadvantaged populations, confounding uninformed expectations of middle-class orientation given their largely suburban makeup.

In fairness, the League’s profile has expanded to include men and to feature gradually increasing ethnic diversity. Yet it cannot be termed a transformative bridging vehicle in terms of membership makeup. Has this durable niche constrained its democratic impact in spite of purposive intent? Certainly it is subject to scrutiny on the basis of class

---


5 During decades like the 1950s and 1970s, the League did succeed in activating previously unengaged citizens through purposive idealism, social lures and relative affluence.


7 Barbara Stuhler, For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 57. In 1998, League members elected Carolyn Jefferson Jenkins of Colorado as the first black to serve as League president; she is still active in her local chapter.
origin. Particularly with the rise of the community organization movement, people of lower classes may prefer engagement in more targeted associations. Historically the League could also be challenged on openness to members of other races through passive lack of welcome rather than formal exclusion (that position was rejected by the 1960s without backward glance). Currently its members are increasingly older than the rest of the American population (with most members approaching retirement age), though their attitudes and stamina are frequently youthful. Checkbook participation does not apply. With time further limiting membership, busy or impoverished people may choose an association more specific to their personal needs.

It is emphatically true that the League trains people for active democratic life. Warren has observed that the association is well suited to induce real deliberation and engagement because its members buy into concepts of communal issue-resolution through active citizenship before they join. Warren calls such deliberate membership “cognitively defended commitment” with shared endeavors governed by principle rather than necessity. The process of seeking consensus is solution-directed rather than interest-
bound. Their method may be slow, but its pace toward solid outcome is faster than most sessions of the U.S. Congress. Inward opinion formation gives each person voice, in faith that the “sense of the group” will exhibit enlarged judgment; outward opinion encouragement in increasingly oriented toward those who disagree rather than stalemat ing with the faithful, respectfully presenting reasons for their positions in the hope of shifting debate.  

It is also clear that the League empowers members as association participants and enhanced individuals. As Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady have pointed out (see Chapter 2, page 38), joiners have a distinct advantage in democratic life, gaining inside knowledge on resources and players, reaching a wider audience with their views, and gaining the leadership skills in a friendly setting before unleashing them on less collegial turf. League members are on the inside track of public awareness, though it is rarely abused. Sayre has observed that many members consider League membership the equivalent of a job (certainly it may lead to an official one and volunteer time can equate to part or full-time work schedules), providing training in public speaking, media, written expression, advocacy, organization and tight budgeting. Susan Hartman points out that the League has frequently acted as a sort of “farm club for women politicians,” providing training, information and solidarity as they prepare to enter the male-dominated political arena. As a result, membership therefore often transfers to candidacy for political office,

12 Sayre, “Volunteer Leaders,” v; and Roberta Francis, “Changed Forever: The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment” (Washington, DC: League of Women Voters Education Fund, 1988), 37. League members learned post-ERA that it was important to address education campaigns toward those who disagreed, not those who were already convinced.


and cannot be underestimated for long-term political impact. Members also grow interpersonally through mentoring, networking and befriending a modicum of diversity along the fringes of policy concerns.

It is useful to look at both the form and degree of League members’ commitment to understand the democratic value of their membership. Their motivations are largely value-based, expressing through active membership a concern for issues, a literal embrace of democracy to solve them, and a pursuit of Progressive goals. These are people more dedicated to public accountability and collective action than to preoccupation with private rights. They exhibit extremely high dedication because of these common values, deep personal bonds that develop in that appreciation, and a sense of enlarged efficacy. With tangible incentives in the range of policy groups and voter guides, they are inclusive in principle but lacking allure for those seeking more enticing direct compensation. For the distinctly small minority of Americans energized by the concept of democratic reform, such perks contribute toward filling a small, sometimes virtual room with open entry yet daunting residence.

Just how durable is this motivation? John Mark Hansen has suggested that as “a consequence of its reliance on intangible incentives, League membership has been

---


18 Actually, the one complication there is guilt. Could the member live down departure among colleagues and friends?
particularly sensitive to changes in income and fashion.”\(^{19}\) But membership data presented in Chapter 3 suggests that membership is in fact fairly stable relative to volatile patterns for other civic groups such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (see Chapter 3, page 86). Yet its democratic activation is not eternal, as gradually declining numbers and folding local chapters show. Time, money and shifting priorities impact even the most dedicated of its contemporary members. With volunteers diminishing for all membership associations, the League will avoid dissolution or professionalization only if its declining grassroots trend is reversed.\(^{20}\)

**Experiencing democratic process**

Whether associations are “incubators” of democratic political norms will be seen most clearly in the structure and process that form their political voice.\(^{21}\) It turns out that these facilitators of individual autonomy and growth through grassroots partnership help collective strength better in federated than in hierarchical structure through enabling a correlated heightening of member commitment.\(^{22}\) The fact that the federated structure is driven by open, accountable and cross-level consensual process gives members a sense of inclusion and opportunity only partly deflated by human maneuvers; the practice of retaining all officers as volunteers contributes to dedication as well. It is highly meaningful that consensus is reached not through instruction but through deliberation, underlining


\(^{20}\) Gittell and Shtob, “Changing Women’s Roles in Political Volunteerism and Reform of the City,” S77.


faith that each individual will reason their best path through convening with others to exhaust all the pros and cons on internal and external issues. Such operating principles align naturally with democratic ideals of equality, self-rule, local direction and pursuit of public interest through process.\textsuperscript{23} Study of wide-ranging opinion and data contributes eventually to mutually justifiable collective action, which in turn traces to individual understanding and action. Leaguers urge all levels of government to participate in their process as partners to address public concerns. It is particularly beneficial that \textit{all} members are welcomed to engage, multiplying the development effect and enriching the diversity of expressed views.

\textbf{Fostering education in citizenship}

Shifting to consideration of what the League actually \textit{does}, first on most people’s list will be its focus on civics, particularly elections. Disagreement has arisen among associations and government over what civics should entail.\textsuperscript{24} The League’s Progressive version of civics urges an alert citizenry, empowered by quality information, and actively insisting on accountable, representative government.\textsuperscript{25}

What could be more fundamentally supportive of a healthy democracy than encouraging everyone to vote? The League’s civic efforts have arguably done a better job connecting democratic process with the citizens supposedly in charge than their government, even though no tax funds are directed their way for this service. It turns out


\textsuperscript{24} Matt Leighninger, “Is Everything Up to Date in Kansas City? Why ‘Citizen Involvement’ May Soon Be Obsolete,” \textit{National Civic Review} (Summer 2007): 13. Leighninger notes that “civic” engagement presently encompasses “conflict resolution practitioners, deliberation experts, campaign finance reform advocates, democratic theorists, dialogue specialists, and representatives of many other related fields . . . [all with] divergent ideas about democracy and citizenship.”


98
dedication to widespread voting may be its most contentious political area of operation, due to starkly different interpretations of the electoral rights accorded by citizenship (briefly described in Chapter 2) and the extent to which the federal government is bound to uphold their uniform protection. While NAWSA was prepared to support both conditional privilege and absolute right as acceptable bases for voting qualification if women won as a result, the League has come down solidly on the side of uniform rights and the need to protect those vulnerable to disenfranchisement. This nonpartisan, principled position has placed the League in partisan waters, since voters needing protection (such as poor itinerants, immigrants, ethnic groups, blacks and youth) reliably vote Democratic. The League delivers argument to all government branches that energetic protection of electoral rights is a fundamental governmental role to be handled on a nonpartisan, legally circumscribed basis.

To kick these principled positions into operational gear, the League asserts that more people will vote if associations independently supplement government-provided information on polling sites, ballot items, voter eligibility, and resources for assistance. Bland and generic, this League service is also vital for citizens needing reassurance for practical poll access and a standard tool for organizers seeking respected independent information. True to its original purpose of getting women to the polls, the League still attempts to heighten and widen free and fair elections through assigning enthusiastic members to registration tables; voter mobilization campaigns; advocacy visits on behalf of


28 David W. Ogden, “League of Women Voters (LWV), Amicus Curiae,” Supreme Court Debates 9, no. 4 (April 2006), 122.
excluded voters; observers of district boundary designators; attentive monitors of polling sites for widening the eligible voter pool; and independent consultants for district boundary designation and voting practices to ensure free and fair elections.  

Voter judgment is improved by the League through candidate interviews and sponsored debates that clarify positions but withhold endorsement. Its “Meet the Candidates,” featured on national and local radio from 1928 – 1951 and followed by its televised presidential debates from 1952 – 1988, provided what came to be seen as a unique public service through providing a fair meeting ground. Most recently, the League has provided the website VOTE411.org, which provides a comprehensive place-specific listing of election material. It claims that *fifteen percent of all voters* accessed this website before voting in the 2008 election.

While voting levels are beyond the League’s responsibility, it attempts to increase numbers by addressing local issues judged of greatest communal importance in order to bridge personal and political motivation and improve voter judgment. While many people will predictably stay away on Voting Day, the League champions their *opportunity* to opt in to the political process and further advocates for legitimate contests when they do. This

---


32 Young, *In the Public Interest*, 3.
functional area results in frequent League lawsuits since such consideration meets partisan impasse and increasingly shifts to the courts.\textsuperscript{33}

League efforts have also been effective at reframing electoral methodology toward Progressive strands of persuasion through advocating rationally presented information, outreach to independent voters and widening direct democracy.\textsuperscript{34} Whether these nationally instituted reforms have improved judgment is unclear; aiming to shift the tone of participation from partisan furor to respectful duty, citizens appear to have returned to emotionalism without the defense of strong party advocates.

When the League charges inequitable participative conditions and tries to empower disengaged and disadvantaged sectors, its reformatory efforts may either be judged supportive of democratic principles or subversive to presently powered groups who benefit from incomplete turnout. There is a predictability in partisan positions regarding voting rights, with Republicans particularly prone to challenging liberalized rules as leading to fraud and Democrats charging voter ID cards and tightened registration procedures to constitute “the largest legislative effort to scale back voting rights in a century.”\textsuperscript{35} The League has until recently placed faith in the judicial system to correct partisan misbehavior in the administration of democratic rights.\textsuperscript{36} But the Supreme Court appears to have judged


\textsuperscript{36} Vogel, “The Public Interest and the American Reform Tradition,” 610-611.
state discretion to trump national regulation, tacitly approving a narrowing of eligible voters toward the middle and upper-classes by state fiat. This fight will be fierce, and the League needs a new strategy.

**Opinion formation**

It is interesting that the activity consuming most of League members' time is the least known or appreciated outside its ranks. When people join local Leagues, they are invited to plunge into ongoing policy groups that consider local ramifications of wide issues. Current focus, for example, of the League's District of Columbia chapter features twenty-five such groups which study subjects as varied as crippled local self-government, caretaking public land, city finances, gun control, energy conservation, public schools and transportation, to name a few. In each case, volunteers dedicate themselves to gathering reports and interviews from official and unofficial sources, supplemented by current demographic, economic, environmental and political information that permits issue consideration from many points of view and affords discovery of previously unknown commonality across jurisdictions. This painstaking study-process eventually produces lengthy reports that guide legislation and inform whichever members of the public are paying attention. It also radically expands subject-specific knowledge among League members engaged in the process.

---

37 See, for example, Ogden, "League of Women Voters (LWV), Amicus Curiae," 122. Ogden provides a record of the League's arguments as Amicus Curiae for the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in its Supreme Court arguments challenging the position of Texas Governor Rick Perry. Governor Perry won the case.

Where does all this knowledge go? The League’s reputation as “citizen expert”\(^{39}\) is applied to Congressional hearings, media coverage, high school education and various local and national public forums it sponsors such as The Red-Blue Divide; The Role of the Media in Politics; and The Changing Face of Power: Women in Politics.\(^{40}\) It contributes to allied efforts with other “good government” associations to broaden public knowledge about subjects like Openness in Government: Looking for the Sunshine.\(^{41}\) Most importantly, it adds to public awareness of brewing collective concerns, for example awakening the country to dangers of water pollution with its “meticulous [and] highly readable” *The Big Water Fight* in 1966.\(^{42}\)

Through these routes, the League attempts to fill the role of “public interest representative” by virtue of its process, non-vested position and knowledge. While it is considered relatively “establishment” in process and method, it is distinctly reformist in study selection, aiming to air subjects that otherwise would not meet public scrutiny and to represent missing citizen “stakeholders” at policy tables to present impacted views before officials rush to judgment.\(^{43}\) But given that it is not the only association dedicated to providing “public information,” such public dialogue and assumption of public interest can

\(^{39}\) Schulte, “Citizen Experts,” 2. Schulte reports that over time, the League has carved out a role as “citizen expert, . . . promoting civic activism and education while acting as a communication and information bridge between government officials and concerned citizens.”

\(^{40}\) League of Women Voters, “Creating a More Perfect Union.”

\(^{41}\) See http://www.lwv.org (accessed 9/15/11).

\(^{42}\) Schulte, “Citizen Experts,” 18.

\(^{43}\) James Mattingly, “How to Become Your Own Worst Adversary: Examining the Connection Between Managerial Attributions and Organizational Relationships with Public Interest Stakeholders,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 7 (2007): 8. Stakeholder terminology is particularly relevant in consideration of distribution of public resources like water, power, sewage and education. In practice, oppositional relationships between public and private parties can be dysfunctional in terms of both representation of enlarged interest and provision of public service.
become highly contentious. Business and industry leaders are increasing adept at adopting similar pose for radically different data sets, even taking time to charge the League with nondemocratic intent and internal methodology.44

Does progressive advocacy compromise nonpartisanship or public interest representation?

It is understandably confusing to the public that the nonpartisan League engages in energetic lobbying. How can such activity be nonpartisan if it has electoral effect? Does advocacy compromise its intent to operate in the public interest? Part of the answer lies in the character of its generalized lobbying aims, which continue to be segments of the Progressive Platforms of 1912 and 1924. On one level, these reform quests are procedural. The argument is that government will be made more effective, representative and capable of responsibly resolving public problems if its existing structure becomes more fair and flexible to changing times. A senior Congressional staff member recently commented that, in his observation, the League is near unique among lobbying groups through assigning its advocacy to causes of process.45 Yet the staffer is not entirely correct, for the League's history is also riddled with substantive campaigns, reflecting its adherence to redistributive versions of deliberative democracy in order to achieve equitable voice. Amy Guttman and Dennis Thompson make these lines clear:

Deliberative democracy . . . is about more than the process of deliberation alone. It is about substantive standards of free and equal citizenship and about the background conditions [of same] . . . if it is to function as well as it can . . . . When power is distributed unequally and when money substantially affects who has access to the deliberative forum, the results of deliberation in practice are likely to reflect these inequalities and therefore lead, in many cases, to unjust outcomes.46


45 The staffer concluded that this stance may protect the League from rancor targeted at other groups.

As a result, the League has pushed for a bigger federal role in insuring quality of life across the spectrum.\textsuperscript{47} Nonpartisanship enters the mix through placing such advocacy outside political parties. The League continues to avoid formal endorsement of any candidate.

Advocacy topics are not selected casually. They evolve from a long, inclusive, sometimes contentious, but in the end consensual process to select aspects of issues and particulars of solutions that are consistent with widely justifiable standards.\textsuperscript{48} Usually targets are selected that are judged achievable in contemporary political climate, thereby crawling reform forward; lobbying surges for grand causes do occur but with less frequency. Each local chapter will feature its own advocacy agenda after considerable committee research and collective consideration. In the District of Columbia, the most energetic lobbying campaigns are made on behalf of voting rights (including statehood), accountable self-rule, gun control and equitable provision of public services.\textsuperscript{49} These represent a fair estimation of issues that \textit{do} drive local politics in the region, and DC City Council members pay attention. National-level advocacy positions fashioned at biennial conventions will lack such specificity, but will in principle show collective cohesion.


\textsuperscript{48} Young, \textit{In the Public Interest}, 54. The League historian asserts, “the very process of consensus formation [yields] results that could be claimed as a fair approximation of public interest at any given juncture.”

Do public problems get solved in an enlarged fashion through its efforts?

For most associations, it would be unrealistic to expect they could claim credit for effecting enlarged collective action. Even the most resolute, capable groups require an enabling political climate. Thus while the League's record is impressive, it is also inconsistent. In some eras, outright victory can be claimed. Public health in teeming inner cities was advanced and disadvantaged voices were strengthened through passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, the League's first lobbying success in 1921. Civil service professionalism was promoted, patronage curtailed and middle-class bureaucrats enabled with passage of the Ramspeck Bill in 1940. In other cases, success came through shifting national opinion to enable future legislative advance. For example, in North Carolina during the 1970s, Leaguers had successfully convinced many residents that improving women's rights was a mainstream concern; yet ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) failed to pass the state legislature. Through the ten-year fight for ratification, ground was laid to re-channel feminism into narrow goals to progress toward educational, credit, sports and salary equity, each representing major redistributive shifts in social condition.\footnote{Anne N. Costain, “Representing Women: The Transition from Social Movement to Interest Group” in “Special Issue on Women and Politics,” The Western Political Quarterly 34, no. 1, (March 1981): 109-110.} Then there are the eras in which the League's efforts are rejected. In spite of heady apparent advance of “good government” and “equitable representation” with the election of 2008, the League's current lobbying for protection of voting rights, nonpartisan redistricting, clean air standards, fair judiciary, and government accountability are, in terms of their definition at least, going nowhere in the present Congress. While this is directly
attributable to the current deadlocked partisan balance, there will be major implications for representative voice and democratic process.51

Can one therefore draw a conclusion about limited efficacy? The League is good at what it does, presenting argument to the appropriate offices in the accepted fashion, with moral high ground on its side. In the past, when its members collectively agreed on an issue of major importance to them, they could appear unstoppable, particularly when strengthened by ad hoc public interest coalitions that helped hone in on specific targets while the League made them appear nonthreatening to the public.52 But current operating conditions are becoming less friendly to such public interest success. Lobbying regulations require all associations to be judicious to preserve non-profit status even though stringent nonprofit lobbying limits were loosened to 20% with the Tax Reform Act of 1976.53 The League had already learned from the ERA that it could not successfully advocate goals American people were not yet ready to embrace, resolving in consolation to develop their opinions toward improved future wisdom.54 It is this accustomed access to public opinion formation that may be most at risk. Shadow operations formed by private interests are swamping the airwaves with radical charges that distract the public and their Congressional representatives, reinforcing existing inequalities.


Taking the democratic bar

Up to this point, the League has rated quite well on a democratic scale defined on pages 26-30 of Chapter 2. It demonstrably enables its uniquely hyperactive members; provides internal and external training for democracy; extends the range of critique for improved operation to encompass government administration; offers electoral service to voters; produces relevant information for important decisions; strengthens disadvantaged voice; deliberates and listens in good faith; and has almost uniquely democratic internal management. Where the judgment gets a bit more interesting is considering more closely those democratic culture parameters set by Warren and recorded on page 92 of this chapter. In practice, they contain some of the League’s greatest achievements and most human failings on a democratic measure.

As the League represents its version of interest, it carefully plays by the parliamentarian rulebook. On the civic scale, it hopes to politicize as many people as possible and hope for membership trends to reflect that range. But its additional insistence on advocacy inevitably narrows those embracing its agenda. To a degree, it tries to avoid this fall-off through selecting causes that won’t disturb, alienate or result in member departure.55 Such judicious selection can occasionally serve expansion yet embarrass the association through hypocrisy.56 But the usual record is one of consistent principle, and the League has settled for durably small membership while staying true to its Progressive origins. If “public policy can only reflect the public interest to the extent that those who

55 Young, In the Public Interest, 49. League historian Young observed, “fostering political education implied reaching out for the greatest possible membership. If at the same time they insisted on pursuing politically controversial legislation, the results would inevitably narrow the League’s membership base.”

pressure the state are an accurate reflection of those who are affected by it,"57 the League will be well served through furthering its ongoing diversification within that constrained frame and operational discipline so as to demonstrably consider all points of view.

The jury may be out on whether consistent adherence to rules and general respect for rule-makers is going to win the support of the general public. The League’s proud history upholding national and international law has shamed senators and presidents.58 Its established ability to pressure government bureaucracy has helped connect large gaps between authorized legislation and performed administration. But in a season turned on its democratic head, the public identifies government collaboration with anti-citizen taint; this appearance, though largely unfounded, may affect its public influence as well as alliance with oppositional, grassroots social movement groups for lobbying. Increasingly, League members agree that distance from government is appropriate in the midst of widening evidence that democratic institutions have mishandled policy, botched administration and disregarded representative public interest.59

As advocates of enhanced public participation, League members are presently suffering a fate shared by their Progressive forbears. They have actively advocated easier voter registration, open government, citizen consultation, and voting right enforcement to help vulnerable populations develop apace with those more favored. These measures are both used and countered by well-financed sectarian associations with public-sounding names, such as the Center for Representative Government, which argue for tightened qualifications to theoretically avoid electoral fraud; in practice, they intimidate those less secure in Judith


59 Schulte, “Citizen Experts,” 1-29. These conclusions draw in large part from working with officials on environmental issues.
Sklar’s citizen entity. While an energetically engaged citizenry was envisioned by the League to extend democratic rights and equitable change, the narrowing participative field allows sectarian groups and the many citizens who support them to begin undoing decades of Progressive legislation with Progressive tools. As James Madison could have warned League members, public opinion is fickle, at times unwise, and frequently dangerous. Some judge public opinion as “value neutral.” But deliberative democrats may be starting to wonder whether the U.S. political system is hopelessly value-biased in favor of fear-mongering elites who crowd out more mainstream concerns of the majority of the country.

Indeed, lessons in political realism for ardent idealists are difficult no matter how many times they are learned. Leaguers are historically distinctive in drawing forward assessments from their suffragist and second feminist wave campaigns to clearly assess the depth of their democratic challenge as forces of emotion and wealth attack what they consider to logical, morally-based argument. Clearly Progressive persuasion methods can be insufficient in the midst of unregulated power politics. League members are beginning to conclude that even “safe” procedural reform is becoming increasingly difficult to promote beyond the League’s cocoon.

---


62 Francis, “Changed Forever,” 14, 24. Comments to this effect were made by leading League activists and quoted in Francis’ retrospective study of the League’s decade-long ratification fight.

63 Ibid., 32. Perhaps it would enhance understanding of their frustration by recalling the nature of their primary opposition: Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum and Stop ERA; fundamentalist churches; the Moral Majority; Mormons (for whom the ERA was termed a sin); Right to Life; Women Who Want to be Women (WWWW); and Men Our Masters (MOM).
The League’s dogged interaction with both Republican and Democratic parties has helped it succeed with association goals in the past. This determined, purposive, bipartisan accessibility is occasionally more strained in regard to the general public. Members aim to celebrate difference and to reform the world, but mores of the time have been capable of producing naïve faith in the American version of democracy and unintentionally exhibiting condescension toward cultural, racial, class or activist difference on the basis of presumed expertise, righteousness and public applause. Such behavior, when it occurs, can undo bridging intent. There are also generational divides as national membership trends slide toward passivity. Veterans of the suffragist and second wave feminist era in particular could be understandably self-congratulating for what were considerable accomplishments. A number were observed to be dismissive toward younger, more cautious members as “sissies,” with possible resignation or foregone development one result. But human shortcomings should not be overestimated; these are generally impressive people doing their best. Collective effort is making a national difference in preserving a degree of informed participation and individuals are likely learning in the process. The human aspect is only relevant to the extent it excludes, deprives, bleeds social trust or makes hypocritical their claim to be operating in the public interest. In respect to

64 It is becoming harder to sustain Republican interest as party delegates become more conservative. Process as proposed by the League is seen as a vehicle for radical, minority-driven interest. Ironically, it is these conservative Republicans who are presently turning legislative process on its head to retrench social welfare programs.

65 See, for example, Megan Threlkeld, “The Pan American Conference of Women, 1922: Successful Suffragists Turn to International Relations,” Diplomatic History 31, no. 5 (November 2007): 801-828. Threkeld presented historical material that recorded active disregard and censoring of non-American attendees at its first diplomatic conference in the name of international female unity.

66 Francis, “Changed Forever,” 37. Those veteran women, according to an ERA activist, “used to terrorize you. They always thought you were such sissies because you wouldn’t chain yourself to anything, wouldn’t get arrested.”
other associations’ performance on these measures, the League will draw a positive, if not quite stellar, grade.

The League’s additions to social capital lodge in surprising places. While non-white members were not welcomed within the U.S. until the late 1950s, its most Progressive pluralist stance has been toward the international community at large. Throughout its entire history, and particularly during the Red Scare and the Cold War, League public education and advocacy efforts energetically sought to good effect for the U.S. to be a respectful, peaceful, law-abiding member of the international community, backing its stance with support for the League of Nations, the World Court, the United Nations (UN), disarmament and conflict resolution that stand, in Louise Young’s terms, among its proudest achievements. Such a stance stretched American civics beyond the local to the remote African village, serving to encourage government institutions like the Peace Corps and changing world estimation of American character. Overlapping membership in the UN Association of the U.S. became predictable among League members.

There will be partisan disagreement on whether the League has legitimately “attended to the common good” in its advocacy, even given the consensual character of its process. Theoretically, it stands in good stead to meet deliberative democracy standards for reciprocal judgments that address the majority of parties impacted by concerns. But precisely who the benefiting public is and what they want for any distribution of public

---

67 Clare, “Resisting ‘the Doldrums’,” 180-207. Clare provides a description of the League’s hedging racial position in the 1950s.

68 Young, In the Public Interest, 24-26, 42, 50. This comment underlines the bulk of historical record which overwhelsms instances such as the Pan American Conference described by Threlkeld.

69 Ibid., 58.

70 Warren, Democracy and Association, 149. This is one of Warren’s democratic associational ecology categories.
resources following policy process will always be contentious, particularly outside its membership. The League’s discipline toward constraint, specificity, deliberation and nonpartisanship helps reinforce its public focus and political role, but it does not always add excitement or eloquence to its reformist campaigns. Nor does it necessarily contribute toward widely held public conversion outside its ranks, though it is unreasonable to expect uniform celebration.

“Contributing to shared values”71 beyond its membership is a near-laughable expectation for associations in 2011’s national season of “balkanized opinion”72 and established preference for identifying complaints over solutions. But persuasion may improve through addressing the League’s gender card restlessly seeking home in a changing society. Traditionally it considered itself a social feminist organization, meaning it didn’t seek full equity for women but rather advancement as part of an improving polity, distancing its goals from those of feminist groups like the National Women’s Party, which exclusively sought rights for women.73 But female gender has always been inescapable, providing its name, the bulk of its members, its reforming style, and its social welfare orientation. As Jean Schulte has pointed out, maternalism is civically useful when so many other definitions are contentious:

Members [have] argued that their civic activities were not only necessary to create a better world for their children . . . but also to safeguard the promise of democracy in a nation founded on informed civic participation: To raise good citizens, a mother [has] had to be well-versed in the ideals and goals of active citizenship.74

71 Ibid., 149. Another Warren ecology requirement.


This rationale for increased democratic participation as a means to preserve the nation’s future is highly compelling to many people. Along the way, it has defied earlier female stereotypes of illogical emotionalism and presented women as arguably the best source for responsible civic reform. Yet a question remains whether its historically effective mantle of maternal “moral superiority” can survive in a supposedly gender-neutral world.75

Most associations will feature both vibrant and lackluster eras at various points in their histories, leading them to expand or retract operation in reaction. At the risk of being unfair to its extraordinary record of accomplishment, it would be difficult to argue that the League has been experiencing the former condition during the past decade. There has been a long internal conversation over which is more important to members: the League as a means to reach a goal or an end in itself for the sheer experience of process. President Anna Lord Strauss had asserted during the 1940s reorganization, “the League is not an end in itself. It is a marvelous training ground.”76 Plenty of democratic causes await, particularly in the process sphere with voting rights under assault at both state and national levels by resurgent Republicans. The League is presently taking on the electoral cause with a vengeance, allied with groups like Rock the Vote that call voter ID and registration restrictions “a war on voting” as they prepare to launch defensive programs for impacted populations.77 Its reputation and sponsoring experience could be vital for the coalition’s success. While Carrie Chapman Catt had hoped for expeditious politicization of women in the 1920s, clearly the project is still underway.


76 Stuhler, For the Public Record, 70.

But the League is not invulnerable to changing fashion amidst disappearing free time and income referenced by Theda Skocpol and recorded in Chapter 2. Impatient for results, feminists have discounted League relevance for the past three decades, charging that the League’s lengthy, consensual process wastes time, accommodates established power and becomes an end in itself. A similar charge could be generally made of good government advocates: Some wonder whether their focus on process is not a solution to substantive differences in a playing field that durably resists equalization. The response to this charge would be that it fails to account for the League’s active principled advocacy, which has usually trumped concerns of retaining membership and added to the loyalty of the members who remain.

Is it getting rewarded for its democratic role?

Chapter 2 referenced measures of democratically laudable public interest groups and presented means by which they could be regulated and rewarded to enhance positive impact (see pages 55-56). Levine argues government should not be neutral with respect to those associations playing important civic roles, and encourages vouchers that reward such volunteer activity and public funds for the associations’ most beneficial functions.78 (The only federal funds received by the League are from the State Department and the Library of Congress for international civil society forums and public diplomacy efforts.)79 There are a variety of other nongovernmental forms such rewards or punishments could take. For example, historians could negatively judge the League’s record in a manner which compromises normative support for current operation. That is unlikely to happen. Its


79 Nancy Tate, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 20, 2011.
record associates it with proud bipartisan achievements many people consider to be integral to the country's democratic character. (One of these achievements — contribution toward an established advance in status and capacity for the women it represents — actually hurts the League's ability to hold onto some of its members as they rise professionally and have less time to devote to voluntary efforts.) Taking that historical view, Leaguers might remind hovering doomsayers that cycles of decline and resurgence have been frequent, and that the League's major successes have occurred in seasons of national turmoil. Could it be that democratic decline could spell League rebirth? The only catch is that conservative activists have empowered a shift toward particularized association and judicial siding with individual prerogative to the cost of collective capacity. This new "political opportunity structure" may be harder for the League to negotiate.80

While the League has historically received very high public respect for its efforts, increasingly disengaged citizens may be too distracted or partisan to affirm the present incarnation.81 The League's traditional preference for avoiding the limelight may contribute to a puzzling lack of public credit for ninety-one years of volunteer effort on behalf of the country's supposedly most important concern.82 As the country descends into verbal warfare reminiscent of pre-Civil War days, democracy's champion may need some help.

In an effort to discern whether the League was benefiting from its extraordinary performance on Warren's aforementioned civic associational scale, Executive Director Nancy Tate was interviewed in May 2011 (refer to Appendix 3 for full author record of the


81 Schulte, "Citizen Experts," 22. Schulte has suggested that the League contributed to its own marginalization within the environmental movement through condescending under-appreciation of emerging groups and comparatively rigid methodology.

82 Ibid., 8.
In response to an observation that democratic theorists argue associations most beneficial to democracy should receive some kind of favorable treatment (see Chapter 2, pages 24-26), she responded that there is no evidence of a trend in that direction. (In fact, the League is more subject to penalty by the Internal Revenue Service because of lobbying limits for non-profit organizations.) During the last several years, the League has been vulnerable to abuse from bonded, partisan organizations. For example, during 2009 the League of American Voters (italics added) was formed to combat the health reform bill under almost identical masthead and twisting familiarly-stated principles with radically different intent. The League of Women Voters (italics added) challenged them for misrepresentation, even going to their physical door and finding it a shadow operation. Filing a complaint, the latter League was deluged with hate mail and hired guards for the national office. Government officials have not acted in its defense. Reward for service may be consigned to historians, though political theorists could find possible martyrdom of an organization unusually effective at producing democratic values and practices a bad sign indeed.

---

83 Nancy Tate, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 20, 2011.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Those Americans who can still afford subscriptions have not stopped joining associations. But dominant choice has not been faithful to an American myth that self-rule is plural, diverse or morally responsible. Rather than selecting banding fabric that benefits and unites a diverse civic community, enables enlarged judgments on the part of the public or contributes to clear, widely-held and generally beneficial instruction to government institutions, citizens are actively supporting a wide array of tertiary groups from conservative-oriented Americans for Prosperity to liberal-inclined Move On via checkbook participation that fuel specific interests at the expense of others less organized or financed and fail to give expression to individual member voices. While purporting to solve public ills, these associations may indeed augment united, purposeful voice in the political process. But they can also cement inequality, promote selective obstruction of civic rights, simplify public argument for the sake of private gain, and fail to provide “members” with an authentic deliberative experience. These association trends pair dismal public participation with irresponsible governance and misaligned policy that impacts the heart of democracy.

By comparison, Progressive-derived public interest groups try to address persistent societal imbalance through representing wider population swaths and time-frames to improve judgment, governance and representation. Civic groups like the League of Women Voters are particularly rare even by public interest group standards. Few associations have shown the durability, success or democratic import of the League over the course of its ninety-one year history. Dedicated to activating all voters and improving their judgment, directly schooling active members and the general electorate on democratic procedure, and relying on grassroots deliberation toward collective solutions, its members embody a process-oriented pursuit of Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood.” If one were to
read a tourist brochure about America, surely a direct descendant of righteous suffragists — proven to operate democratically, develop its members’ civic capacity, and reform democratic institutions — would be held as a national treasure, protected and preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Debatable legacy

In fact, the League is struggling to survive while the other sectarian, hierarchical and democracy-disabling groups are thriving because the concepts it promotes do not represent uniformly cherished national values.

The very concept of citizen participation is highly contentious. The current American system is largely designed to handle delegated civic authority with only occasional public participation, presuming actualization of the people’s will through election day and government process. Progressive era reforms may have launched some direct democracy elements, but elitist power politics continue to define most electoral and legislative success. Political operators can be brutal in coralling only those who will get their job done. Even informed reformers may judge citizen disengagement as less than disastrous if ignorant unpredictability is avoided in the voting booth. Others may be pleased with low turnout because resulting representation will more reliably advance their interests by virtue of those who forgot, chose not to show, or were blocked along the way.

The expanding divide between what Americans are reputed to celebrate in democratic theory and what they choose to cultivate in daily life is essentially a rejection of the presence of "one nation" alluded to in every pledge of allegiance. Public opinion swings on whether public-interest membership associations like the League are laudable, let alone sustainable, because of disagreement, particularly fierce in an era of financial straits, on identifying the important “public” for distribution of scarce or commonly-held resources.
There is far-ranging public disagreement with the League and other groups on whether Americans remain an improvable population. Given recent widespread opportunity to participate in public forums on health reform, citizens across the country repaid the favor with violent shouting matches and durably ignorant expressions of hate and distrust. Human development above such lows requires opportunity, which translates to time, self-sufficiency and education. Many people who believe they celebrate American civic life will not support such opportunity for other people, preferring vague displays of the national flag and guarding against incursions on their own resources.

League members reject such civic boundaries, resist negative branding of opposition and continue to have cautious faith in Americans’ developmental capacity, a testimony to the virtues of a long, careening history through liberalized and reactionary national chapters. Like John Stuart Mill, they bridge private with public lives, arguing that the former compels the latter, which in turn transforms the original self-interested motivation toward enlightened sense of greater cause.\(^1\) They are aware that historically, “the rights for citizen participation . . . have turned out to be value-neutral”\(^2\) and capable of advancing regressive minority cause. American pursuit of individual rights and the accountability and regulation that protect their exercise will predictably conflict. (The League can actually play both sides of that dialogue as a result of its promotion of individual civic rights and its emphasis on government action to protect them.) Still, they have faith that fine-tuning democratic process will make engagement as equitable, developmental, and inclusive as possible.


Divided attitudes do contribute toward slow League decline in a consumer-driven joining market. It is no longer fashionable to be a member. But civic-minded people, while always small in numbers, doggedly continue to seek bridging centers for public activism, and the League’s membership has stayed remarkably stable on a national level relative to other membership associations (see Chapter 3, page 86). Expressive activation of altruistic class-bridging purpose extends in impact beyond the narrowly circumscribed joining population and gives deep satisfaction to the impressively loyal membership, which may average toward the elderly spectrum but does feature highly engaged younger members determined to carry the legacy forward. It is because of the durable attraction of this normative motivation for Sidney Verba’s distinctive few (see Chapter 2, page 40) that this thesis foresees a viable future for public interest associations.

But the League is not invincible, particularly at its trademark grassroots level. As an example of shifting trends, the League of Women Voters of Oregon had historically been a strong chapter, reflecting the strength of the western Suffragists, their 1912 success in the state, and the subsequent civic proclivities of the urbanized western coastal strand. Their state-level survival is now in considerable doubt as numbers plummet at an unusually high rate. Six (out of twenty-three) local Leagues have disbanded since 1981. Two thirds of the remaining Leagues have less than fifty members. Statewide, membership is down by 30% within thirty years, a much faster decline that the incremental national pattern.³

While the League is celebrated as an extended grassroots institution, it is hard not to argue that the national span of its localism is fighting a losing battle. Some local chapters like Centre County, Pennsylvania continue to thrive (see Chapter 3, page 89), helping drive

---
the national figures which remain stubbornly resilient in comparison to other groups facing empty chambers. But many state chapters of the League face the prospect of significant consolidation, causing members to travel considerable distance for attendance and to address agendas that are less local and personally relevant. This may make it harder to bridge the private and the public through the League’s original model (see Chapter 3, page 68-69). Adding such travel to already tightened time and money constraints, those members who find farther travel difficult may resign at faster rate.

**Paths toward League resurgence**

The League has traveled through cycles that skirted organizational disaster through partisan divide, financial distress, reactionary targeting and disinterested population amidst laissez faire regulation before. While the operating climate for associations has fundamentally changed with increased pluralism, technologically-driven communication and reduction in volunteer time, there are a number of ways it could revive both its membership and its purpose.

The first step is practical and achievable. Association engagement in the public arena could be made more fair through strengthened, rational government regulation of the non-profit sector, standardizing rules, instituting financial curbs, providing guidelines for what constitutes extreme messaging, and actively monitoring full disclosure, fair practice and democratically-consistent operation within any association receiving 501c3 or 501c4 benefits. A highly meaningful innovation would be the narrowing of official definition for “association” to those groups with active volunteer members and separate tax category to match (see Chapter 2, pages 19-23 for description of this area).

The second method is in theory fundamental yet in practice quite challenging. Ailing civic culture is causing the concept of representative, national-scale democracy to lose
individualized meaning. Public-spirited action is very difficult as a result and likely to be drowned out by Madison's worst nightmare of narrowly informed factions unleashed. Helpful reforms might revive widespread civic education; acknowledge direct value of bridging civic acts and attitudes; discipline for disabling behavior when accorded official civic role; widen public participation through voting holidays; improve public discourse and fairness by establishing clear ground rules for engagement vehicles like town halls; and finally, face up to the reality of multi-ethnic, split-class citizenship as a collective identity and acknowledge ownership as such of the difficulties faced by some Americans when attempting to exercise their civic rights. Such a reinvigorated culture would also reward those associations whose membership actively promotes individualized experience of democracy on a daily private and public basis. Compensation could be directed toward associations themselves, for example through communication subsidies to equalize voice with less democratic organizations on public channels, or feature vouchers sent directly to members for public service activities such as polling monitors and high school registration. Conceivable payment or penalty aside, the League's most important return would be an enabling culture that would finally deliver the long-awaited expression of gratitude for services and behavior unrewarded for close to a hundred years.

The third approach is to try yet again at what has become a misnomer, effecting "good government" through deliberatively reaching for the common good through a focus on process.4 The Progressive Era that helped spawn the League also launched deliberative democracy as a theory. Some theorists dismiss this field as "democracy for the sake of

---
4 In addition to fair procedure, "good government" can refer to a range of reforms that address accountability, the quality of public management, mutability of democratic structure, range and character of popular sovereignty and protection of political equality.
democracy.” Yet without it, there is little room for moving beyond polarized politics and eventual popular discontent on a massive scale. Deliberative democrats reject politics as power play, insisting America’s normative dedication to “liberty, freedom and justice for all” on a mutually reciprocal basis can only be realized through uniform embrace of fair process. Clearly, the League is not alone in asserting that the public interest must be experienced through reciprocal engagement. Robert Dahl has argued that the “common good” resides in the practices, institutions, and processes that . . . promote the well-being of ourselves and others . . . .” As noted by Warren and cited in Chapter 2, public interest groups like the League therefore have a vital role to play in effecting a deliberative process that connects the public to the formation of policy and administration of services. As one of the few viable national membership groups still focusing on civics, the League earnestly advances a rational participative vision of America in the faith such change will eventually emerge if public passivity toward failing institutions is overcome.

The fourth path to League revival is through astute tapping of citizen discontent to gain new, highly concerned members prepared for activism on behalf of democratic process. For example, the League’s history representing women’s fight to exercise rights is a powerful legacy that has extended to helping other vulnerable populations. The argument

---


8 Warren, “The Political Role of Non-Profits,” *Society* 4, no. 4 (May-June 2003), 48. “The deliberative elements of a democracy can only organized along associational lines and the deliberative publics can only emerge where there exists social bases in voluntary associations.”

is that knowledge of civic rights and the state of the union leads to power, then to political inclusion, empowering membership and the voting public to improve both democratic responsiveness and societal equity. Increasingly, the League is joining with other associations to advocate for universal protection of active citizenship. If nativist state-level trends continue to be championed by governors and legislators, the League’s righteous counter-effort will become highly partisan and may test its nonpartisan brand.

The League is also clearly gaining new steam from what has been recently termed a resurgent “war on voting” (see Chapter 4, page 114) that restricts registration, tightens ID requirements and punctures recourse for abuse. Nothing could be more threatening to the association’s fundamental purpose than this current recruitment gift from Republican activists seeking to manipulate their way to electoral victory. The League is uniquely positioned to appear to rise above the fray yet redeliver Carrie Chapman Catt’s revolutionary message on the occasion of the Nineteenth Amendment: “The vote is a power, a weapon of offense and defense . . . . Use it intelligently, conscientiously, prayerfully . . . [to] serve the common good.” Members are energetically devising new strategies to encourage diverse turnout and provide defense to those challenged at the booth. This aspect may indeed expand the League’s generational attraction, since younger voters are among the impacted populations.

Shifting needs, swamped mainstream and reduced membership may call for organizational change. The League is considering whether its congenial style is no longer

---


appropriate when clamor may be needed for fair contestation. As Amy Guttman has observed,"

The politics of mutual respect is not always pretty . . . . Citizens may find it necessary to make extreme and uncompromising statements . . . . These strategies may be justified when for example, they are necessary to gain attention for a legitimate position that would otherwise be ignored . . . .

Competitor Alice Paul had demonstrated during the suffrage fight that passion can merit a place in both public discussion and problem resolution, both in recognition that it is frequently inevitable on all sides in the former and in perception that it can be particularly effective in the latter on behalf of the less powerful.13 Exhibition of this emotion is not new to otherwise rational-appearing League members, given the depth of their moral convictions.

Since 1924, the League has held that “the [agenda] Program is the thing.”14 Amy Guttman would agree that the principle political battleground is in setting the public agenda.15 The League can use this theoretical argument to enhance the relevance of its deliberative approach for identifying important public topics. Procedural agenda activity can drive judicious advocacy for otherwise neglected issues, help the public insist on shifting stalled institutions away from peripheral special-interest minutiae and, like in 1924, give members reason to stay involved (see Chapter 3, pages 74-75). This method of resurgence blends well with people seeking to “take back America” and “restore” it to storied progressive responsibility.

12 Guttman, Why Deliberative Democracy, 89.

13 Ibid., 51.


15 Guttman, Why Deliberative Democracy, 142. To make such agenda-setting fair and informed, Guttman argues for principles of preclusion, reciprocity and basic opportunity.
The League can also gain members by capitalizing on a growing movement to reclaim popular sovereignty over government process in order to protect a fair democratic playing field. Its internal operation and external advocacy insist process is a tool — not a Bible — that should be deliberated and amended to fit circumstance and social need. Without access to procedural change through agreed means, minority parties will have no confidence their position is factored into the eventual “sense of the group.”\(^\text{16}\) While those attending to contemporary events can disparage the intent or capacity of participants to honor process and provisions for its flexibility, mutability is a founding principle of the country that was viewed essential for ratification of the Constitution in 1789, therefore providing legitimate recruitment potential.

An additional path to continued survival and potentially increased effectiveness would provoke controversy through tinkering with the League’s federated membership structure. Theorists such as Peter Levine and John D. McCarthy consider chapter structures important to extending, through franchise association, identity and democratic impact (see Chapter 2, 50-51). Indeed, federation webs have helped extend the League’s impact in the past (see Chapter 3, pages 64-66). As Warren has noted, grassroots federated structure indicates an organizational commitment to member development as a path toward achieving association goals (see Chapter 2, pages 20, 30 and 41). But in practice some League members dedicated not only to democratic process but also to advocacy and sustainability now privately find the structure overwhelming and overly slow in a fast-paced contemporary environment. As a result of local trends exhibited by the fate of the League of Women Voters of Oregon (see page 121 of this chapter), it is possible that the League’s best

prospect for national survival is ironically as a centralized protest business with fewer, less engaged volunteers members (see Chapter 2, pages 46 and 48) and professionalized retention of purpose to fight on contributors’ behalf. On the negative side, such centralized direction and professionalized operation would make it harder for individual members to be heard and develop through community. Given the established relation between association structure and purpose and members’ motivation to join and stay, altering the structure would likely result in member flight. While the League might become more efficient, audible or competitive for achieving organizational purposive goals in this response to local travails, its traditional democratic contribution rendered through volunteerism and legitimate representation would, in member loss, diminish.

Weighing disbandment

Democratic theorists disagree on the question of whether government and civil society should be neutral while associations with proven civic benefits struggle to remain in existence. Nancy Rosenblum cites some limitations, but essentially argues for Darwinian life cycles. But given the stakes for fair democratic participation and governmental accountability, passivity may not be neutral if the League’s decline is unabated. While “the moral uses of pluralism” may encourage individual choice — and indeed, the League is not for everyone — Rosenblum’s caution that selective favor would “legislate schools of virtue” seems odd if the League’s virtues in question are inscribed throughout the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

17 It is, however, difficult to picture League members becoming a “non-lucrative distraction.”

18 Vogel, “The Public Interest Movement and the American Reform Tradition,” 627. Such is the argument of Vogel: “The only way that one can really live as a ‘public citizen’ is to make a living at it . . . making opposing business into a business.”

Theoretical arguments for life support on the basis of the League’s superior
democratic character may be irrelevant if financial support or viable membership literally
die out. In that case, are there other engagement vehicles on the horizon that could step into
its shoes? The answer, of course, is yes. There are plenty of advocacy groups representing
disadvantaged voters. In fact they seem to be everywhere. Many groups attempt to educate
the public about pressing collective concerns, though it can be difficult to assess the quality
of their information or the validity of their origin. Concern with democratic process is not
unique to the League; Common Cause could carry the torch. Nonpartisan voting protection
could be undertaken by the Brennan Center for Justice and Rock the Vote. Where the League
is unique and irreplaceable is in the combination of advocacy, education and civic rights
through (1) developmental process within its own membership-intensive ranks and (2)
process guardianship for national democratic institutions. Recall the heyday of the 1940s
referred to on page 84 of Chapter 3: when a small collection of civic-minded women in
small-town North Carolina sought a vehicle that could enlarge and focus their wish to help
strengthen their communities through democracy, they personally plunged in to form their
own little chapter at tremendous effort, for the League presented the obvious and only
choice. It may remain alone in that role today.

---

20 Rod Clare, “Resisting ‘the Doldrums’: The League of Women Voters in North Carolina in the
Mountain versus molehill

To some extent, it is a stretch to attach significant concern to whether the League survives or folds. Its membership is miniscule compared to large groups like the American Civil Liberties Union. Speaking realistically, one association — no matter how civic — cannot improve the country's engagement dynamic; only a shift in national culture that celebrates diversity, deliberation and active citizenship can do that. Besides, participation was never intended to be pervasive in the U.S.; at best, citizens have been positioned to serve as sensors.\(^\text{21}\) Perhaps the League’s expectations of potential citizen behavior are unreasonable and unnecessary. Human judgment is frequently erratic, even when guided by process. If public opinion is, as Tocqueville feared, beyond redemption as strange and without rational explanation — let alone positive content — civic education may be hopeless. People turn out to vote in regrettably small numbers but they’ve done so regardless of whether they are supposedly contributing to competitive elitist democracy, power politics, plutocracy, or whatever the fashionable disaster theory may be, so intervening in the dynamic could be considered useless. Moreover, there are other ways to participate besides joining associations, such as responding to polls, attending town halls, performing community service, and independently following the development of relevant issues. (The problem here is that people who join civic groups have also been demonstrated to engage in those alternative acts. Civic behavior multiplies itself, and its absence on the association roster is likely to duplicate in the other civic forms.)

In a similar vein, League closure would not end association linkage of civil society and government if one judges by the energetic jockeying of remaining players. They may be lacking in clear volunteer character or local support, but they certainly deliver an

\(^{21}\) Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 300.
expression of somebody's interest. Yet it is precisely the self-interested, procedure-
irregular, memberless-direction, and public resource-mismanagement of that thriving
“self-rule” that is at issue. If indeed these thriving political-oriented shadow associations are
the incubators of America’s democratic norms and serve as dominant sensors for public
policy, a conceivable League demise might suggest a new season of self-first, entire-never.

The association landscape has profoundly changed in the last forty years. Recent
conservative administrations have fashioned what Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol term a
“new political opportunity structure” with “new technologies and models of association
building” that benefit a “redistribution of political voice” toward conservative populists,
ironically increasing government size while asserting ideals of American unity gone-by at
the expense of social welfare.22 Judith Shklar’s vision of American citizenship as uniformly
affording “a demand for inclusion in the polity”23 is being significantly narrowed.

Pierson and Skocpol argue that reduced viability of bridging membership-driven
associations has "diminished democracy" through realigning collective assets toward
privatized identities, values and aims. The paucity of stable public-oriented membership
groups leads, in their view, toward “the attenuation of shared citizenship and equal
opportunity in America’s future.”24 As grassroots trends decline, “public interest” will
inevitably take on a more elitist tinge driven by the informed, educated professionals who
dedicate themselves to its advancement. The public interest appears to have left the
mainstream of American sentiment so successfully channeled by the League in the past.

---

22 Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist


What the League of Women Voters seeks most fundamentally — and what is at primary risk should it fail — is a closer relationship between the original sovereignty vested in the popular government and the recognized justice of its actions. The most important democratic aspect of public participation is informed assent. When Americans ratified the Constitution in 1789, they did so instrumentally, in order to achieve the realization of particular interests through common unity. The lack of deeply held common values in that relatively homogenous society became even less binding as pluralism took off through immigration, growing inequality and societal complexity, causing a majority of the country to feel apathetic, constrained or pragmatically willing to be manipulated. Yet only normative agreement can breed the sort of active consent Tocqueville believed he glimpsed within the American population. To achieve that positive goal within this divided climate, “the source of legitimacy is not the pre-determined will of individuals, but rather the [open-ended and continuously learning] process of its formation, that is, ‘deliberation itself.’” That form of legitimacy amounts to a definition of the League’s history and promise, underlining a judgment that it should be protected for some form of Camelot-like fate through closer appreciation of its contributions to democracy.

---

25 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 198. Habermas submits that there are different levels of private assent to public actions: coercion; tradition; apathy; pragmatic acquiescence; instrumental acceptance; normative agreement; and ideal normative agreement. Assent does not bode well for vibrant democracy until it reaches normative form.

26 Ibid., 233.
APPENDIX 1


APPENDIX 2

CHANGE IN MEMBERSHIP OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL U.S. POPULATION

APPENDIX 3

AUTHOR’S RECORD OF INTERVIEW WITH NANCY TATE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

(1) *Looking at sustainability in terms of member numbers and finances, do either affect the League’s program effectiveness and how?* Nancy Tate commented that League administrators are not sticklers at the national level in terms of defining members to be only those who formally join and get active within the local Leagues. (The local Leagues, though, do stick to those definitions, so their numbers will be different.) If both members and supporters are counted, the current number is 140,000. It used to be that one could join at either the local or national level. That was changed within the last two years to local-joining only.

There is a Membership Recruitment Initiative (MRI) that has been operative for the last several years wherein the national office, with the help of professional consultants, provides expertise to local chapters to expand their membership, training them to grow. Thirty-two state Leagues are helped this way.

Fundraising is challenging. Twenty-four percent of their funding comes from dues. The only federal money comes through (1) the State Department for the Global Democracy program and (2) the Library of Congress for the World Leadership program, which recently engaged with Tunisia and Cuba. Most foundations do not fund general American democracy initiatives, preferring to favor those that target specific populations. The League does get support from the Carnegie Corporation for Vote 411 and from American Express for work in five cities where the corporation has call centers and wants to be seen as responsive.

Anonymous donors support election reform through the League at the state level. Community foundations almost always support at the local level only. So the national division of the League is very dependent on special contributions.

(2) *What are the prospects for confederated structure in a protest business age?* Tate was surprised to hear confederated structure is back in theoretical vogue (see Chapter 2, page 50-51). Confederated structure is awkward bureaucratically; though League members and staff accept it as defining who they are, they don’t totally celebrate it. She sounded a little envious of Common Cause, which doesn’t have to be as attentive to its members and may be more effective as a result. It would be hard for other groups to activate members in the same way; it takes long evolution, sustained attention, and a certain character for the agenda.

(3) *Is the character of member engagement changing? How are younger members being drawn in?* See MRI. People need to learn to share and bring themselves and their chapters up to date. If they ask for help, the national office is prepared to step in, for example by getting people comfortable to intentionally ask people to join the League. They need feedback, and a support system. The Ruth Shur Training Program helps empower members to develop in this direction.

(4) *It appears that the education, activation and advocacy functions of the League have remained consistent over its 91 years. True? Has technology transformed the delivery?*

---

1 Nancy Tate, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 20, 2011.
Advocacy has always been an important element of the League’s operation. It has to be drawn from forty-two national policy areas that have received official approval through painstaking consensual process engaging members at all levels. Tate frequently encounters public misunderstandings regarding League advocacy, including those who believe the League can’t take lobbying positions and remain non-partisan. She points out that the League never limited itself to services like voter registration, and has always, in addition, taken stands on issues. But it never endorses candidates.

But for the local Leagues to take stands, they have to arrive at them by democratic process. For example in regard to immigration, the national League office couldn’t say anything until local Leagues contributed to national resolution of a League position. This is time-consuming democracy in action.

Technology will become more and more important. There will be fewer and fewer mailings. Given who they serve, what they are trying to achieve, and the extent of their funding, they consider themselves without choice but to go heavy on technology and virtual presence. There will be a new website this summer, featuring blogging, which seems to work very well.

(5) Democratic theorists argue that associations most beneficial to democracy should receive some kind of favorable treatment. Do you see that happening? No. The League is very vulnerable to abuse from other organizations and government officials don’t step up in its defense. For example, in 2009, the League of American Voters was formed to combat the health reform bill under almost identical masthead. The League of Women Voters challenged them, even going to their physical door and finding it a shadow operation. Filing a complaint, the League was deluged with hate mail and hired guards for the national office.

(6) What are your most valuable alliances? Have they helped achieve some otherwise elusive successes? Everything is done in partnership, though few partnerships extend across the board; they tend to be specific. Most give next to no return and draw most from the League’s reputation to assist others. For example, the YWCA and the Junior League are both “paper partners,” sharing facilities with the League across the country. For an issue like election finance reform, the League teams up with Common Cause and others.


