

EDUCATION ON PUBLIC POLICY IN AGRICULTURE THROUGH THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

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The topic of this section—joint public policy education opportunities—speaks to the heart and soul of the League of Women Voters. No other organization in American political experience has been so identified in the public mind with the concept of educating citizens on issues and encouraging citizens to vote and participate in the policy process as informed individuals.

The League was founded in 1920 as an outgrowth of the women's suffrage movement. At the time of its founding and since, the League has acted on the belief that policy issues are not for the few, but for the many; that citizens have an important role to play in the governmental process and a responsibility to communicate their views on policy to decision makers; and, perhaps most characteristically, that a basis of unbiased, thorough and wide-ranging information is a key component of responsible citizen action.

In 1920, when women were first enfranchised, League leaders saw policy education as a necessary tool for women first approaching the voter role. However, the need of *all* citizens for information quickly led the League to become a provider of information on policy issues at all levels of government: national, state and local. Education and action were the dual facets of the League's approach to policy.

The League's work on issues occurs through a network of 111,000 members plus thousands of friends of the League. The structure of the League includes the national League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS), 50 state Leagues, and 1,200 local Leagues. In 1957, the LWVUS created the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) as a research and citizen education organization. In keeping with this purpose, the LWVEF conducts special projects and programs on a variety of critical policy issues, sponsors presidential debates and offers other services to voters. A major asset of the LWVEF's policy education work is its access to the

League of Women Voters' network. In turn, the LWVEF provides the substantive information and the resources to enable League leaders to stimulate thoughtful public dialogue.

Over the years, League members have not shrunk from policy education on very complicated issues: national issues such as tax policy, welfare policy or national security; state issues like election laws or environmental protection; local issues like local taxation, education issues or zoning. In 1986, at the League's biennial national convention, delegates adopted a two-year study of federal agriculture policy, surely one of the most complicated subjects ever. The study arose from apparent member concerns about the farm crisis at that time, about the high cost of farm programs in a nation with record-setting budget deficits, and about the plight of the "family farm." Now the final stages of the League's initial two-year study are approaching. What can we see resulting from this effort that will affect policy education opportunities on food and agriculture issues?

First, the study means that the League is now "into" agriculture—at least into the basics. League members know the basics of key issues, having studied material provided by the League of Women Voters Education Fund, having probed issues and picked brains at the state and local level, and having (I suspect) contacted many of you in this room for information or with requests to speak at League meetings.

The concerns that League members have expressed as they proceeded with the study indicate a number of interests related to federal agriculture policy. League members do not disagree with the customary purposes listed in most preambles to farm legislation: production of adequate supplies of food and fiber at reasonable prices to consumers while allowing farmers a reasonable return on their investment and labor. Leagues are also attracted by the possibility of increased reliance on the free market to determine the prices of agricultural commodities. Government assistance in expanding foreign markets for U.S. agricultural products also appeals to League members, but they are also concerned about the health of developing countries' economies.

League members are very enthusiastic about the importance of research and technical assistance to the agricultural sector. Farm credit is another issue of their concern; they think it is appropriate for the federal government to make sure that farm credit is available under reasonable terms. Most of all, perhaps, they are attracted by the idea of an agricultural system maintained with due regard for preserving and safeguarding natural resources. Interest in and curiosity about sustainable agriculture have been something of a hallmark of the League study. It seems safe to say that the League will be a committed citizen presence on agricultural policy issues in the future.

The next few years represent a crucial stage for those who are concerned about the future of U.S. agriculture policy. The well-being of the farm sector is affected as never before by macroeconomic policies that shape the price of commodities, the affordability of credit and the value of farm land. U.S. farmers operate in a complicated international environment. Their lives and income are affected, not only by decisions made in Washington and by consumers across the United States, but also by decisions made in Seoul, in the European Community (EC), in Tokyo, in Brazil and in Ottawa. The interdependence of the economies of the world is a notable political fact.

The fiscal circumstances of federal budget constraints in a Gramm-Rudman-Hollings age further complicate the approach to agriculture policy. Additional complexity comes from the increasing importance of environmental concerns. The effects of agricultural production on groundwater or on food quality and safety must now be considered by producers, processors and public officials. Indeed, the traditional approach to agriculture policy making may be inadequate if the nation is to face successfully the challenges of interdependence and international competition. This is an exciting time as farmers and others involved in the agriculture sector, citizens and elected officials together, grapple with the need to develop a realistic and appropriate agriculture policy for the future.

The challenges and complexity have a couple of implications for joint public policy education efforts. First, we know that citizens need to be involved in this debate about agriculture policy; it affects them in many and vital ways. Second, citizens need help in gathering information and understanding issues. This is a role that you in this room play; the League and other organizations have a role in this as well. It would seem that there is a natural basis here for cooperation and partnership. To be sure, Leagues will be working on a variety of other national, state and local issues of their choosing. But agriculture policy has the appeal of being cross-cutting. It ties in with their interests in the environment, in international trade, in sound fiscal policy, in the prevention of poverty. The very complexity of agriculture policy makes it a natural for a multi-issue organization.

In policy education, Leagues are accustomed to reaching citizens in their communities, using a variety of methods—discussions, forums, debates, field trips, demonstration projects, interacting with other organizations and the like. Over the next few years, the League of Women Voters Education Fund expects to be providing leagues with information, materials and training on agriculture policy issues to assist them in increasing citizen awareness about this important area.

The LWVEF also will be cooperating with Public Voice for Food and Health Policy in a joint project, focusing on one broad issue area

each year for three years. In the first year we will focus on the issue of pesticide residues in food and water and explore problems and options. The second year will bring a focus on the structure of agriculture—consequences for consumers and rural communities. The third year will center on what could be done to achieve a safer, healthier food supply. Each year's activities will include policy seminars, regional training workshops for citizen leaders, publications, networking and outreach to other organizations and model citizen education projects through the League of Women Voters network.

We know that we will be in touch with many of you as the League continues its focus on agriculture policy. We will look to you for advice and expertise. We hope you will let us know of particular interests that you have in policy education that fit with the focus that I have highlighted for you. We want to work with you as we continue to emphasize agriculture policy.

Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, agriculture is too important to be left to the experts alone. Agriculture affects all of us and the League of Women Voters Education Fund believes that policy education in this complicated and fascinating area can equip citizens to be participants in, rather than bystanders of, the policy process.