

## VOTING RIGHTS

# Still Fighting for Voting Rights

In 1920, the National American Woman Suffrage Association became the League of Women Voters.

By GLENDA C. BOOTH  
MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE

Love was in the air last week on Valentine's Day. For the League of Women Voters (LWV), love is always in the air, the love of voting. Feb. 14 was the 103rd anniversary of the national League of Women Voters and this year marks the 75th anniversary of the League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area.

Registering voters is the heart and soul of the organization. Registration volunteers go to farmers' markets, festivals, libraries, town meetings, high schools, colleges and new citizen ceremonies. In 2022, the Fairfax LWV registered 4,500 voters in the Fairfax area, including over 2,000 at local high schools and 2,300 at naturalization ceremonies for new citizens. Nationwide, the League registered 35,000 new citizens as first-time voters. This spring, members will conduct voter registration drives at George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College and recruit the next generation of LWV members.

Annandale resident and Fairfax co-president Pat Fege especially enjoys registering high school students. "I strongly believe that voting is the most important right of citizenship and must be accessible, valued and used," she said. "When students register to vote, the information they learn in government classes has a real-life connection. They understand that through voting, they can have an impact on their government."

On Feb. 22 at Mount Vernon Estate, the Fairfax League, which has members in both Fairfax City and County, will register new citizens at a naturalization ceremony. "This is the first act these people take as new American citizens, to register to vote, because we are there," says Arina van Breda, Director of Voter Registration for the chapter.

The League is strictly nonpartisan, never endorsing candidates, with around 2,000 members, men and women, in Virginia. "Lots of other organizations get involved in voter registration once every four years," notes van Breda. "We are



Statue of Carrie Chapman Catt, President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and founder of the League of Women Voters, at the Turning Point Memorial.

doing this year in and year out. We promote civic engagement and do so in a civil manner. And because we have been doing this for over 100 years, people know they can trust the information the League provides."

"The League of Women Voters is the largest organization that has its ears to the ground to voters," says Alma Couverthie, chief programs officer for the national League. "Our power and influence as the oldest voting rights organization support our mission to empower voters and defend policies that support a strong and equitable democracy."

## Voting Not Always Assured

Voter registration and voting have had a bumpy history. Voting advocates cite obstacles throughout U.S. history like literacy tests, partisan and racial gerrymandering of districts, inconvenient polling

spread pamphleteering.

Fairfax County was the scene of a turning point in that movement. In 1917, over 1,000 suffragists, dubbed the "Silent Sentinels," peacefully picketed President Woodrow Wilson on the White House sidewalk seeking his support for the suffrage amendment. On Nov. 10, 1917, police arrested 27 women picketers for "obstructing traffic" and jailed them in the Occoquan Workhouse at Lorton, fed them mostly hard bread and maggot-laden soup and denied them water. Guards chained Lucy Burns by her wrists to her cell door all night. The night of Nov. 15, 1917, at the workhouse became known as the "Night of Terror." In 2021, the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial commemorating the movement opened near the former Workhouse.

The League was born out of the suffragist movement when in 1920, the National American Woman Suffrage Association became the League of Women Voters.

Deb Wake, president of the Virginia LWV says, "103 years ago, women knew we could not change laws until we had the right to vote and that to vote, women needed to be educated on the issues."

## Paying to Vote

Until 1851, in Virginia, only adult, white, property-owning men



A naturalization ceremony at USCIS District Office in Merrifield, Virginia earlier this month after which the new citizens were registered to vote by LWV volunteers.

had the right to vote. In that year, the legislature repealed the property ownership requirement, thus en-

## Panel Discussion

March 8, panel discussion:

"Finding our Voice - The Vote," with the Fairfax County Public Library system. <https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov/event/9940341>  
What's on the 2023 Ballot, Fairfax Facts and LWV activities. Primary date is June 20. <https://www.lwv-fairfax.org/>.

franchising all white men. After Reconstruction (1865 to 1877), many southern states, including Virginia, enacted a poll tax as a prerequisite for voting, which effectively disenfranchised poor people and Black people.

Virginia's poll taxes remained in effect until the 1960s and ended, in part, due to the efforts of Evelyn Thomas Butts a 41 year old Black community activist, mother of three and grandmother who was married to a disabled veteran and worked as a seamstress. In November 1963, Evelyn Thomas Butts and her attorney Joseph A. Jordan Jr. filed the first suit in a federal court seeking to have the poll tax declared unconstitutional. In March 1964, Annie E. Harper and a group of people from Fairfax County filed another federal suit against the poll tax. The two cases were later combined. On March 24, 1966, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the combined cases called Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections that the use of a poll tax in

all elections was a violation of the U.S. Constitution. <https://edu.lva.virginia.gov/dbva/items/show/71>

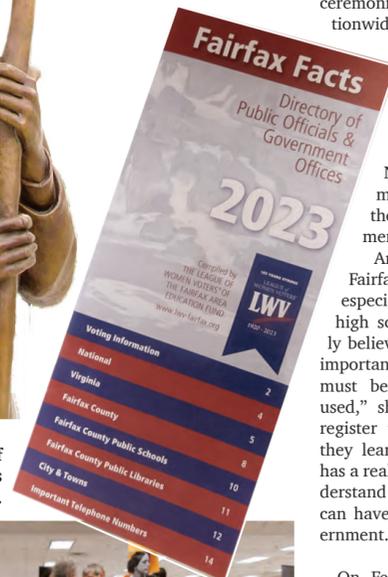
In 1964, the states ratified the 24th U.S. Constitutional amendment, outlawing any tax as a precondition for voting in federal elections. In 1966, a U.S. Supreme Court decision extended this policy to all elections.

In Bernice Colvard's history of the Fairfax LWV chapter, she wrote, "In those early years League members compared the local registrars' books with the poll tax list. Residents who had paid their poll tax but were not shown as registered to vote were so advised by post cards, urging them to check their voting status. This created a furor and brought about changes in voting registration procedures."

By Colvard's accounting, "The impetus for a League of Women Voters in Fairfax County came during the period of dramatic change wrought by World War II and the construction of the Pentagon which brought burgeoning population growth and concomitant demands for public services. In 1943, Fairfax County residents, many of whom were members of the District of Columbia League of Women Voters, began meeting to discuss foreign policy. A year later the Fairfax County Voters League was formed," and in 1948 the chapter gained official status.

SEE STILL FIGHTING, PAGE 10

One of the prominent statues at the Turning Point Memorial is of Alice Paul, founder of the National Woman's Party.



The Fairfax League of Women Voters prepares "Fairfax Facts" every year.



The Fairfax League of Women Voters has registration events all over the county many times a year.



LWVFA volunteers after registering students at South County High School: (from left) Beth Tudan, Jessica Storrs, Sheryl Williams, LWVFA co-president Pat Fege, Arina van Breda, Debby Pool, Judy Smith.



Fairfax League members had a life-size cutout of suffragist Susan B. Anthony at Supervisor Dan Storck's Feb. 11 town meeting. Here, left to right, Elizabeth Woodruff, Teresa Knox, "Susan B. Anthony" and Arina van Breda.



A recent voter registration and information event on campus at NOVA Annandale, with volunteers Kristen Ferrand (center) and Mary Ann Bradley speaking to a student.



Elizabeth Woodruff, Arina van Breda and Teresa Knox encouraged people to register and vote at Supervisor Dan Storck's Feb. 11 town meeting.

# VOTING RIGHTS

## Still Fighting for Voting Rights

FROM PAGE 9

### Active Advocates

The Chapter soon began to take on several local public policy issues, including advocating for a strong public school system and dismantling racial segregation in schools. "Complete integration of Fairfax County Public Schools was achieved by the late 1960s," wrote Colvard. Since the 1970s, the League has championed the equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In 2022, the League convinced the Board of Supervisors to endorse the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Every year, the chapter publishes Fairfax Facts, a compendium of local government information.

League members also lobby state legislators, including making trips to Richmond during General Assembly sessions. This year, among other measures, they supported repealing the witness requirement for absentee ballot envelopes, the right to marry amendment, ranked choice voting and bills requiring safe gun storage. They opposed diverting public funds to private schools.

A major initiative in 1993 was the "motor voter" bill, to enable citizens to register to vote at motor vehicle agencies automatically and by mail and at agencies that serve the public.

While most Americans today take the right to vote for granted, League members are quick to draw on suffragist Susan B. Anthony's words: "Someone struggled for your right to vote. Use it."



PHOTO BY ARINA VAN BREDA

A newly naturalized citizen being registered to vote by LWVFA volunteer and former president, Anu Sahai. In 2022, the LWVFA registered nearly 2,300 new citizens to vote.



PHOTO BY ARINA VAN BREDA

LWV volunteer Kristen Ferrand at a recent South County high school voter registration event explaining voter registration in the classroom.



PHOTO BY GLENDA BOOTH

At the Turning Point Memorial, panels tell the story of the American women's suffrage movement.