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Non-Partisan or Not Interested: The Carbondale League of Women Voters' Response to Civil Rights during the 1960s

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Introduction

"I think we have to accept the fact that we are a primarily white, middle-class group," stated Mrs. Mary Grace Smith, former president of the Boston branch of the League of Women Voters—a nationwide organization formed in 1920 that continues to advocate for women's political engagement. "Some people can't afford to be volunteers of [the league] sort. It's more important for them to use what leisure time they have to work on matters of immediate community interest—such as upgrading the ghetto school rather than trying to abolish the Electoral College." Mrs. Mary Grace Smith's implied views on class and race, spoken before Congress in 1970, seem to reflect a popular understanding within the League of Women Voters—an understanding that helps to explain the League's actions and inactions during the previous decade.

Not too long after its founding, the League of Women Voters [hereafter, the LWV] decided to become a "nonpartisan" organization. They did so by refusing to express publicly any alignment with any political party or candidate. But, as with many organizations claiming to be nonpartisan, the League seemed to be superficially nonpartisan, and, in action and sentiment, they often found sympathies with the Right. This sympathy can be seen in the LWV's earliest days. For example, on January 27, 1921, LWV founder Carrie Chapman Catt delivered a speech in which she stated, "In view of the fact that many thousands of members of the League of Women Voters are Republican by tradition, this challenge [of non-partisanship] takes on a peculiar significance."[1] Catt seemed to be foreshadowing some of the future peculiarities that would define the League and its purpose: Republican sympathies mixed with non-partisan impulses.

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[1] Barbara Stuhler, *For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 39.

Nowhere were these seemingly paradoxical drives more apparent than in the LWV's policies toward African Americans. Through their claims to "non-partisanship" and their expressed abhorrence of "controversy," these women were able to strategically choose the issues they felt worthy of addressing. And, with regards to African American concerns, the LWV's record is striking. It is one marked by silence, tardiness, and misplaced attention. Yet as much as the archival record reveals this apathy, it also shows moments of intense anxiety over African American concerns. This was particularly true during the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, during the early 1970s, the LWV worked hard to desegregate the schools of Southern Illinois. Within Carbondale, IL, in particular, they conducted numerous interviews and drew up surveys to ensure a comfortable adjustment for the African Americans who were entering the predominantly white schools. Yet, even these actions spark questions. Had not *Brown v. Board of Education* declared separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional as early as 1954? Why, then, did it take the LWV so long to follow the law? These delayed responses run counter to the League's claim that it stood to "take action on governmental measures and policies in the public interest."

This paper focuses on the policies and actions of the Carbondale branch of the LWV. In particular, it focuses on the confusions surrounding the LWV's engagement with African American Civil Rights. Drawing on organizational papers, internal memoranda, and regional newspaper clippings, this paper analyzes the ambiguities of the LWV's racial politics. It finds that at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, these women doubtlessly spent a great deal of time discussing the issues. Yet it is also true that a great deal of time was dedicated to finding ways to protect the LWV's "image." This often translated into overlooking the unfortunate situations of African Americans. It is said in the League's bylaws that its purpose was "to

promote political responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government" and to "take action on governmental measures and policies in the public interest."[2] That being said, whether or not the League of Women Voters in Carbondale made good on these promises during the Civil Rights era remains debatable.

Literature Review

It was not until the 1970s, in the wake of the women's movement, that scholars gave the history of women's voting serious attention and it would not be until the last two decades of twentieth-century, that they began to focus on the women's suffrage movement and the politics surrounding it. Despite the significant array of literature on women's rights and women's suffrage, there remains a lack of scholarship relating to League of Women Voters (LWV). The league functioned—and continues to function—on national, state, and local levels. This complexity is something that many scholars tend to overlook. What has been written on the League is often from the agency itself, and very little of it is critical. There have only been two books published on the history of the League; and a handful of articles also exist.

The first scholar to take up the League of Women Voters as a topic of study was Louise Young, in her 1989 publication, *In the Public Interest: the League of Women Voters 1920-1970*. Young's text is a comprehensive account of the League of Women Voters. It also provides an overview of the nation during those years. Yet, in addition to her scholarly aims, Young also seems committed to educating the LWV members of their own history. Of particular note is the fact that Former League of Women Voters' president, Percy M. Lee, provided the forward to Young's study. In it, Lee asserts:

[2] Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 4.

> The hope is that this book will be widely read and will supply some valuable perspective on the times it covers. It is a remarkable review of the major political issues that mark the first half of the twentieth century. It is also a testimony to the dedication and effectiveness of the political women.[3]

Given these circumstances, it is difficult to know how invested Young was in dismantling the LWF's rhetoric of "non-partisanship."

It was not until 2000, eleven years later, that another scholar attempted to engage the League's history. Barbara Stuhler's book, *For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters*, is in explicit conversation with Young's text. As Young describes, "With fifty years of selected documents, [this book] is intended to serve as a useful complement to *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters, 1920-1970,* Louise M. Young's narrative history of the League's first half century of achievement."[4] The sources in *For the Public Interest* help to elucidate the history provided by Young. Stuhler states that "speeches made by league presidents at national conventions or council meetings were the most helpful [in reconstructing the League's history] because they summarized the activities, accomplishments, problems, and shortcomings of the League in a given period."[5] Yet these public utterances speak largely to the façade of the LWV—less to its internal dynamics. Nevertheless, *For the Public Record* stands as the last scholarly book to address the LWV.

Between Young and Stuhler's publications, a handful of scholarly articles dealing with some of the nuances of the League of Women Voters emerged. In her article, "First League of Women Voters in Florida: Its Troubled History," Joan S. Carver, former dean of the College of

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[3] Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), *ix.*
[4] Barbara Stuhler, *For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), *xi*.
[5] Barbara Stuhler, *For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), *xi*.

Arts and Sciences at the University of Jacksonsville, focused on the Floridian branches of the LWV and their difficulties in adjusting to the South. By focusing on the tensions between the national and state branches, Carver exposed the diversity and complexity within the LWV. Moving from regional matters, in 2002, historian Marisa Chappell looked upon the LWV to read for class concerns. Through her comparison of the League of Women Voters to the National Organization for Women (NOW) as they confronted poverty in the 1970s, Chappell challenges the assumption that "all middle-class white women ignored the problems of poor women… highlight[ing] a critical turning point in American liberalism."[6] Yet, despite these efforts, no scholar has yet critically analyzed the League's ambiguous stance on issues relating to African Americans, in general, and the Civil Rights Movement, in particular.

The current scholarship on the League of Women Voters implies that scholars have skimmed the surface of the League's history, but a more evaluative and analytical discussion of League's stances and activities, at a local level, demands consideration. As an organization formed to increase women's roles in public affairs, it is surprising that the scholarship devoted to the LWV has overlooked race as a topic. This paper, therefore, serves to correct this trend. Following the adage that "all politics is local," this paper examines the League of Women Voters in Carbondale. In so doing, it explores Carbondale's League and suggests that—whether consciously or subconsciously—in the 1960s, at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, the League used strategic techniques to ignore the plight and position of its African-American neighbors. This paper further argues that this strategic ignoring was made possible by the

[6] Marissa Chappel, "Rethinking Women's Politics in the 1970s: The League of Women Voters and the National Organization of Women Confront Poverty," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 4 (2002): 159-179.

League's "non-partisan" stance. Such an inquiry not only serves to contribute to the League of Women Voters' scholarship, it also works to question the nature and motives of neutrality.

League of Women Voters: Early History

After seventy-two years of struggle, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, guaranteeing all women the right to vote. In the midst of the fight stood the courageous Carrie Chapman Catt, founder of the League of Women Voters. Since 1919, she had been challenging women to finish the battle "for the changes in customs, laws, and education so imperatively needed."[7] Catt had three immediate goals: "to complete the enfranchisement of American women, to remove legal discriminations against them, and to reach out a helping hand to their sisters in other lands."[8] During this heightened atmosphere, the National American Woman Suffrage Association [hereafter: NAWSA] declared its dissolution at its Jubilee Convention. Almost immediately, Catt was prepared with ideas to make a new auxiliary organization, the League of Women Voters. In 1920, at the Victory Convention, NAWSA formally agreed to transform itself into Catt's League. There, bylaws and a constitution were adopted, as well as a four-member executive board, comprising a chair, vice-chair, secretary, and treasurer, was established.[9]

A clear picture of the League's purpose and commitment is best illustrated by its 1921 brochure, published to encourage women to join the organization. It reads:

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[7] Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 33.
[8] Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 33.
[9] Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 37.

> "**BECAUSE** it is the only organization in existence for the political education of women.
>
> **BECAUSE** it develops the intelligence of the individual voter through forums, discussions and the spread of information on public affairs.
>
> **BECAUSE** it gives disinterested unpartisan information on parties, candidates and measures.
>
> **BECAUSE** it offers programs for practical civil work in your state, your city, your town.
>
> **BECAUSE** it works for better law enforcement.
>
> **BECAUSE** it works for better legislation on matters which women should be primarily responsible.
>
> **BECAUSE** it provides meeting grounds for all parties and groups…
>
> **BECAUSE** it encourages women to enroll in political parties and work through them to improve the machinery of government.
>
> **BECAUSE** it is organized in every state and you can accomplish more through a great National organization than by working alone.
>
> **BECAUSE** it unites the country's woman power into a new force for the humanizing of government."[10]

In the beginning, many women voters feared that the League's efforts to educate women on political parties would benefit the opposition. Eventually, both Democrats and Republicans agreed that the League's efforts were relatively evenhanded.

Over the years, the League grew to be a collection of activist, grassroots organizations, interested in playing a critical role in advocacy.[11] Its purported commitment to nonpartisan organization and to the education of female votes endures to this day. Nonetheless, League members—both yesterday and today's—have been encouraged to get involved by educating

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[10] Reprinted in: Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 38.

[11] "About the League," League of Women Voters, accessed December 11, 2013, http://www.lwv.org/content/about-league

citizens about, and lobbying for, governmental and social reform legislation.[12] This tension between nonpartisanism and social activism rests at the heart of the movement. It is around this tension that a number of anxieties seem to circulate. And, the activists of Carbondale were not immune to this tension.

Carbondale League of Women Voters

The Carbondale League of Women Voters, known as the Jackson County League of Women Voters until 1952, held its first organizational tea on March 18, 1926. With fifty women present, the meeting took place at the home of Mrs. H. G. Easterly, who was elected president, while Mrs. John F. Daniel was elected vice president. The meeting was supposed to have taken place in 1925. The delay was explained in a telegram to the State League reading, "Murphysboro almost wiped out by tornado and fire. Meeting postponed."[13] The League would come to be the homes of many prominent women in the area, such that of Miss Woody. Later, she would receive the honor of having a campus building bear her name at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (hereafter, SIUC). Woody would also serve as dean of women and head the Economics Department, positions she held from 1911 to 1948, at Southern Illinois Normal University [hereafter SINU].[14]

The Jackson County League did not waste much time getting down to work. "Immediately the League was educating its members and interested non-members, showing them how to take an active role in promoting good government and political responsibility through

[12] "About the League," League of Women Voters, accessed December 11, 2013, http://www.lwv.org/content/about-league
[13] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 8, Folder 2.
[14] Southern Illinois Normal University would later change its name to Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

informed and constant examination of government affairs."[15] On May 19, 1928, they cooperated with the State Organization Department by holding a one-day conference in Carbondale at the Hotel Roberts for everyone who wished to attend.[16] Within the next year, the League along with SINU held a "School of Citizenship" at the campus library. Those events, along with many others, worked to give the League a title they would be proud of, the title of an action group. Because the League hoped to avoid stereotypical views of women's organizations of that time—views that painted women as over-emotional or inert—this was a significant step in the right direction. The League prided itself in its study and in its action. Before taking a position on any issue, they claimed to conduct research, attend public meetings, talk with officials, and analyze community needs.

The League first began experiencing troubles in the Depression years with a decline in its membership. Much of the League's survival is largely credited to Hilda Stein, Associate Professor of Zoology at SINU-SIUC. Her efforts are made evident by the bulk of letters she contributed to the League's archival materials. On October 15, 1935, she assured the state organization that the "Jackson County League is by no means dead," and again in 1938 she guaranteed that the "League was still on the map."[17] Stein's efforts, however, were not enough to convince the State branch that Stein's organization was still active. Membership rested at fifteen souls; twelve of whom had yet to pay their dues. It was not until the 1950s that the League was brought back to life. Within the next years, membership rose to thirty-five. By 1957, membership reached one hundred and five. That would be the last time membership dropped below one

[15] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 8, Folder 2.
[16] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 8, Folder 2.
[17] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 8, Folder 2.

hundred people. At the onset of the 1960s, the League of Carbondale was strong and vibrant, and as the tumult of the era came to settle on Southern Illinois, the LWV continued to hold firm to its non-partisan stance.

Non-Partisan

Still, for the LWV of Carbondale, the 1960s was a time of internal self-scrutiny and uncertainty. With unceasing requests for a clear statement of the League's policy on nonpartisan activities, the League found itself in a position to constantly clarify its stance. On July 23, 1962, League president Marian Ridgeway attempted to make clear their stance by quoting by-laws from the local league handbook. She explained:

> The By-Laws of the League of Women Voters of the United Stated (and of Carbondale's League) state that the League shall not support or oppose any political party or candidate. This policy of nonpartisanship. . . must be jealously guarded. . . . because only to the extent that the community is convinced of the League's genuine nonpartisanship. . . . will the League be able to render effective service.[18]

The letter also referenced two other points in the handbook relating to the League's nonpartisan policy. According to the National League's by-laws, the Local Leagues' purposes were to "promote the purpose of the League and to take action on local and governmental matters."[19] Further, resting on the by-laws, Ridgeway clarified what the League was and what the League was not. As Ridgeway saw it, the League was not:

a. A vehicle for individual or private purpose or advancement, political or otherwise.
b. A "society" women's organization, for "society" ends.
c. An instrument for the use of and support of any special interest group, political party, or candidate party.

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[18] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 10.
[19] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 10.

d. A local organization, solely, operating autonomously in a local environment, without restraints, obligations, and duties in a broader organizational, geographic, and political context.
e. A profit-asking organization, or one to be used indirectly for anyone's personal profit or benefit.[20]

The League's stance was ambiguous. What the League defined as a "special interest group" was never clarified. Nevertheless, LWV's actions speak to what the boundaries of this definition might have been. As the question of Civil Rights began to appear, "special interest groups" seemed to become increasingly synonymous with certain ethnic groups, specifically African Americans.

Vigorous attempts were made by the League to stress the roles of its individual members. Individual members were encouraged to be as partisan as they wished so long as the League's image was not compromised. In this way, the LWV artificially separated the political tendencies of its members from the politics of the organization. This stance also calls into question how the LWV sought to "take action on local and governmental matters," while not supporting any party, group, or person. The LWV was, therefore, riddled with contradiction. In an open letter to the board members of the Carbondale League of Women Voters, Esther Kovarsky wrote:

> It is sometimes possible that a desired image and a basic principle will not conflict, but when they do they produce an ambiguous and frozen stance, such as the posture of the League on civil rights.[21]

Kovarsky's letter strongly indicates that the members of the League were aware of the ambiguity in its nonpartisan and noncontroversial positions.

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[20] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 10.
[21] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 1.

Faced by the challenges of the 1960s, Kovarsky was concerned for the League. As her writings suggest, Kovarsky wondered how an organization, such as the League of Women Voters, functioning as a democratic model and training ground for effective citizenship, could place limitations on the freedoms of its members. Such limitations, she implied, should be examined carefully—especially those limitations placed on members in active service on the League's boards. When a vital issue presented itself, demanding constant attention and, sometimes, immediate choice and action, the absence of a League position was "not a directive," but a "vacuum," Kovarsky feared.[22] If board members had to ask for clearance to take stances on matters such as Civil Rights, the League was covertly exerting force on which partisan politics it would allow, if not openly support.

Taking a nonpartisan stance tended to regulate organizational procedures more than the actual results of those procedures. This gave room for the League to tinker with the meaning of compliance. The LWV was able to act in accordance with its by-laws, yet preserve its own interests. If the League felt it had to be noncontroversial as well as nonpartisan in the face of a particularly threatening matter, their seeming commitment to neutrality heightened. This neutrality, then, was often and regularly expressed by the LWV in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. In such a way, being expressly "noncontroversial" was often extremely partisan.

Until *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the LWV could take refuge in the law to avoid taking a stand on African American Civil Rights. The logic went: the law was an expression of state, not a party; the LWV followed the law of the land. Yet,

[22] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 1.

as the laws enshrining racial segregation were toppled, the LWV's expressed commitment to "law" and "legality" was at a crossroads. By its own standards, African American civil rights should no longer have been labeled "partisan" or "controversial" or of "special interest," for after 1964, it was a legal fact. The controversy of Civil Rights, then, did not stem from lack of state support. For the League, Civil Rights was controversial because it caused its members and their constituents discomfort. To have taken action in support of Civil Rights would have only been to support existing law. Yet with these laws, in particular, the LWV was markedly tepid.

Civil Rights

Carbondale's League of Women Voters could not avoid the topic of Civil Rights forever, especially when activities related to the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) began to pop up in Southern Illinois. SNCC was a prominent organization involved with the Civil Rights Movement around the United States. Founded in 1960, its young members, made famous for their sit-in movements, sparked a wave of other SNCCs throughout colleges in the South. After much discussion during the 1950s, students throughout the nation were ready to discard traditional values and confront discrimination by the 1960s. On April 6, 1965, League member, Mrs. Trimble, stated that Mrs. Pickett, representing SNCC, had asked her to announce at the annual meeting the upcoming SNCC rummage sale scheduled for April 24. In response to Mrs. Trimble's presentation of SNCC's request, fellow LWV member Mrs. Keene commented that such an announcement would be inappropriate and that there would be no further discussion of the suggestion.[23] There are two straightforward readings of this interaction between Mrs. Trimble and Mrs. Keene. On the one hand, Mrs. Keene could have simply meant that a rummage event would be "inappropriate" for the LWV to support, or, on the other, Mrs. Keene

[23] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 5.

was asserting that the LWV was, implicitly, not in support of SNCC and its cause. To understand the implications of Mrs. Keene's utterances, we must first look at the history of Civil Rights in Carbondale.

After the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in in 1960, a branch of SNCC was set up at SIU. Immediately, Carbondale students began implementing ways to integrate the restaurants in the area into the movement. However, they could not do this alone, and soon a few local ministers joined them. "Mover and shaker," Reverend Lenus Turley, was a positive face in the community and served as president of Carbondale Human Relations Commission, the go-to organization in the black community.[24] SNCC approached the Carbondale Human Relations Commission to recruit more black members. This devoted group of students, professors, ministers, and community leaders soon became the Carbondale Civil Rights Council.

Carbondale's citizens made substantial protests in the 1960s. SNCC picketed Carbondale's Family Fun restaurant because they did not hire blacks as servers, cooks, or carhops.[25] Whites, too, were involved in the movement. Police arrested white as well as black students for their participation in sit-ins. Thereafter, Civil Rights workers organized a fifty-man march on the community streets in honor of a white minister killed in a voters' registration drive in Alabama.[26] Students continued to take a firm stance on racial discrimination in Carbondale. They urged the Student Council to take action on discrimination, joined the Mississippi Summer Project, and strategized over Head Start Programs.

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[24] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, Beatrice Stegeman Collection on Civil Rights in Southern Illinois, Box 1, Folder 1.
[25] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, Beatrice Stegeman Collection on Civil Rights in Southern Illinois, Box 1, Folder 1.
[26] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, Beatrice Stegeman Collection on Civil Rights in Southern Illinois, Box 1, Folder 1.

By 1963, Civil Rights was on the LWV's radar. If anything they saw it as something that required their attention, if not concerted effort. In the wake of SNCC activism at SIU, a discussion ensued concerning the place of the League of Women Voters within the unfolding Civil Rights crisis. Mrs. Jacobini read a lengthy comment from the National president, Mrs. Robert Phillips, suggesting her attitude and comments towards the League's position. It was at this meeting that the Carbondale League chose to appoint a Civil Rights chairperson. However, the League mentioned nothing pertaining to the Civil Rights movement at the next meeting. A few months after the appointment of the Civil Rights Chair, the committee on Civil Rights met and planned to study issues such as housing, freedom of residence, and the problem of capital. Between 1962 and 1963, the major concern of the League seemed to rest on the publication of their "Know Your County" study. Other potential research projects, such as a study of the city and a revision of "Know your Town" also consumed the LWV's attention. Practical matters, such as proper garbage disposal, also were pressing causes of the day for the League.[27] In December 1963, the Civil Rights committee reconvened, but it had yet to embark upon any definite program. Housing and a survey of open occupancy seemed to remain the committee's main interests. Mrs. Wieman asked at the December board meeting if the League could co-sponsor an Institute on Freedom and Democracy, but the board reached a consensus. They could not.

The Civil Rights committee ultimately proposed that its local agenda should be to explore the question of equal rights and opportunities for minority groups in Carbondale, with action as indicated. By this point, the community of Carbondale had been taking action for years.

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[27] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 19.

Nevertheless, the committee published this new commitment in the LWV's October bulletin and presented this information at the general meeting. Surprisingly, when the bulletin went to press, the LWV declared that it could not take a position on the Civil Rights Bill of 1963. "Since we have not studied this as a league," they claimed, "we cannot take a league position on the Civil Rights Bill."[28] They then went on to ask individual citizens to let congressmen know how she felt.

By February 1964, the League decided to take action on the "Exploration of the Question of Equal Rights." On May 5, 1964, the Civil Rights committee sought approval to conduct a survey on attitudes towards open housing in a section of southwest Carbondale. On the topic of housing, the League was in agreement with Civil Rights workers who were also focusing on issues of housing in the area. At the same time the Human Relations committee welcomed a survey of local attitudes towards acceptance of neighbors of other races, creeds, and nationalities. Thus, it would be unfair to say that the League put no efforts into the question of Civil Rights. Nonetheless, when compared to the action taken by other local citizens, the League's response to Civil Rights seems paltry.

With the exception of Mrs. Trimble's suggestion to appoint Mrs. Randall to the board and to chair of the Civil Rights committee on November 29, 1965, there was no mention of the usual Civil Rights committee report until late 1966. The League held board meetings in May, June, July, August September, October, and December of 1965, and during that time, Civil Rights never once made the agenda. And, even on December 29, 1996 when the League revealed its

[28] Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Special Collections Research Center Archives, League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records, Box 1, Folder 5.

immediate concerns at the board meeting, the question of Civil Rights remained absent. Considering the events of the day, this seems silence is puzzling.

In the midst of the League's evasion of Civil Rights, Carbondale students along with thousands of other students across the country organized Freedom Summer. Freedom Summer was a voter registration effort in rural Mississippi organized by black Civil Rights workers in 1964. They targeted the system that used disenfranchisement tactics to prevent blacks from voting in the South. With the increase in white hostility, President Lyndon B. Johnson demanded action on voting rights. The League's final mention of Civil Rights for quite some time happens five months after Johnson's plea. On the passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting discrimination in voting, the LWV had little say. The fact that the League ignored Civil Rights for months after this decision suggests that it was again trying to avoid its very own duties as it defined them… "To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government," and to, "take action on governmental measures and policies in the public interest." If the League wanted to continue to toy with its meaning of "nonpartisan" so that it could avoid "controversial" matters to "protect its image," that is understandable. However, no such logic can adequately explain the League's lack of effort towards Civil Rights when the disenfranchisement of its own fellow citizens was on the line.

The League of Women Voters in Carbondale did not address the matter of Civil Rights again until September 15, 1967, and in this context, it was to simply announce its new Civil Rights committee chairperson. On April 4, 1968, leader and crusader of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King. Jr, was assassinated. Yet, there was still be no mention of Civil

Rights at the League's board meeting in April before his death or at the board meeting fifteen days after his death.

The assassination of King took a heavy toll on African Americans. Yet America achieved its last civil rights legislation, the Equal Housing Bill, due to the national mourning and widespread anger of blacks, not due to the indifference of organizations like the LWV. College students across the nation understood that this was not the end to their fight. In 1969, a National Student Strike manifested. Students had been performing non-violent protest throughout the 1960s. One year later, a similar strike took place at SIUC. It resulted in the arrest and immediate suspension of three-hundred-six students and the closing of the school for the remainder of the year. What the local League thought of these events remains a mystery, for the internal files made available to SIUC's Special Collections does not contain any Meeting Minutes from April 7, 1968 to April 17, 1970. For an organization that so carefully recorded its history, this omission is puzzling, if not telling.

Conclusion

From the beginning, the League of Women Voters in Carbondale wasted no time promoting good government and political responsibility. During the 1960s, they devoted ample time to issues regarding voting and the safety and conservation of their community. Unfortunately, at a time when both blacks and whites were racing together to give African Americans the basic privileges and rights of U.S citizenship, the League's enthusiasm subsided. On the surface, the greatest obstacle to action was the League's nonpartisan stance. Yet, still, if we look at the LWV's founding principles, we can safely say the members of the 1920s had been more enthusiastic in seeing white women vote than their counterparts in the 1960s were in protecting

the voting rights of black women. Women had been fighting alongside African Americans for centuries, trying to achieve acknowledgement of their basic rights. It is evident that the LWV did not draw on this same tradition. The League of Women Voters failed to realize that African American problems were society's problems, not "special interests" or "partisan politics." This impulse to treat American concerns as "particular" and white concerns as "universal" is part of the LWV's legacy. It speaks to a problem endemic in many women's organizations in America, and it also hints at some of the ways that the rhetoric of neutrality can be used as a weapon.

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- League of Women Voters of Jackson County Records (Box1-10)
- Beatrice Stegeman Collection on Civil Rights in Southern Illinois (Box 1-1)

Secondary Sources

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