

A Brief History of the LWV and the Presidential Debates And a Resolution for 2016

(This is the transcript of a Youtube video which is also called "A Brief History of the LWV"...)



In 1920, after over 60 years of organizing, thousands of patriotic women (and a few good men) saw the culmination of their efforts in the passage of the **Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution**, granting women the right to vote in all United States elections.

That same year they created the **League of Women Voters** and began the important work of holding candidate forums, researching the issues, and encouraging citizens to vote.

Beginning in 1976, the League sponsored televised debates between Presidential candidates, including the Carter - Ford debates (1976), Reagan - Carter debates (1980), and Reagan - Mondale (1984).

The Campaign Train was rolling down the tracks, providing balanced, nonpartisan information to the nation's voters.



The Campaign Train Gets Hijacked



In 1987, leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties announced the formation of a new Commission on Presidential Debates, and dictated a set of rules and restrictions for future debates.

The Commission and its corporate sponsors wanted the League to participate, but only as a figurehead with no voice in the planning.

The League Stands Firm

The League asked the Commission to allow them to participate in the planning process, but they were rebuffed. During months of discussion, the League remained true to its principles. In the end, League President Nancy Neuman held a press conference and announced "*an organization set up by the parties is not an appropriate sponsor for the Presidential debates.*"

*"...never in the long history of the League of Women Voters have two candidates' organizations come to us with such stringent, self-serving and unyielding demands. ...It turned out that the League had two choices. We could sign their closed door agreement and hope the event would rise above the manipulations, or we could refuse to lend our trusted name to this charade. **The League of Women Voters is announcing today that we have no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public.**"*



Presidential Debates Since 1988



The League has had no role in the debates since 1984.

Since the debates were highjacked in 1987, the League of Women Voters has provided election information on its web site and has sponsored many candidate forums in local communities and at the State level. But compared to their previous role when they were sponsors of the Presidential debates, the League has essentially been “left at the station.”

And the highjacking of the Presidential Debates has had a significant impact on candidates and voters.

Third Party Candidates Have Been Thrown Off the Train

The Commission sets arbitrary criteria for participation (such as requiring candidates poll at average of 15% in an average of 5 national polls). These criteria virtually ensure that third party candidates are excluded.

The one notable exception was Ross Perot (Independent), who appeared in all three debates in 1992. *Ross Perot was shut out of the 1996 debates*, despite (or perhaps because of) having captured 18.9% of the vote in 1992.



In 2000, Ralph Nader (who was on the ballot in 40 states) was threatened with arrest when he tried to enter the debate hall, *even though he had a valid ticket.*

In 2012, Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and her running mate, on the ballot in 37 states, were *arrested and handcuffed to a chair for 8 hours* after they tried to enter the hall during a Presidential debate.

Political Discourse is Increasingly Narrow

Since only two political parties participate in the Commission’s debates, it is easy for media networks to ignore third party candidates, focusing instead on the latest partisan charge. The parties set the agenda, deciding which issues are discussed.



Is this really the only choice available to American voters?

“It is unfortunate that the news media have been left with nothing to cover but the machinations of the candidates’ organizations. The American people deserve more than photo opportunities, sound bites and 30-second TV commercials. They deserve accessible candidates and honest answers to the tough questions that will face our next president.”

-- Nancy Neuman, LWV President in 1988



Options were Limited in 1988

Withdrawing from participation in the debates was a principled and practical decision in 1988. The major television networks controlled the air waves. The Commission had a lock on the Presidential debates. Seeing no alternative, League leaders accepted the inevitable, registered their protest and stepped aside.



New Tools for a New Century

But times have changed. And there is a new generation of League women and men prepared to mobilize for the 21st Century.

In 1988, there were 3 major television networks. Now cable, PBS, Hulu, Youtube and others have created powerful new ways to reach voters. And social media makes it possible to attract viewers nationwide at low cost.



A New Election Forum

In 1988, there seemed little point in holding a Presidential debate if the two major parties refused to participate. But the past 24 years have shown that the national conversation must include third party voices and consider a wider range of issues. Only the League has the mandate, the membership and the moxie needed to sponsor a new forum.



Regardless of whether or not the major parties choose to boycott the new event, the League and the American people cannot be held hostage to their actions. If the two parties choose not to participate in a League sponsored forum, perhaps it would be appropriate to include two empty chairs at the table!

Proposed Action



Only the national LWV can adopt a formal Resolution to reinstate the League-sponsored Presidential debates:

Resolved that the League of Women Voters shall host Presidential Debates in 2016, inviting all national candidates who meet qualifications set by the national LWV Board.

Delegates to the 2013 Washington State LWV Convention unanimously adopted a Resolution encouraging national LWV to act, and pledging to help raise awareness and support if they do.

Please ask your local League to consider whether it is time to return to our mission of providing in-depth information to America's voters regarding Presidential elections and to contact the national LWV Board with their thoughts. (And if you're not a LWV member, join us and speak out!)

Visit www.lwvmasoncounty.org for a copy of our State Resolution, videos and other resources.