

LWVAC Statement on LWV History

The League of Women Voters of Athens County (LWVAC) acknowledges the painful history of the League of Women Voters (LWV) as a national organization. At its founding in 1919-1920, and for many years afterwards, the LWV was an organization that excluded women of color and ignored their political needs and concerns. Moving forward, the LWV—at the national, state, and local levels—recognizes this discriminatory legacy, and centers its work in the 21st century on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

The women's suffrage movement originated in the 1840s and 1850s among Black and White participants in the campaign to abolish slavery. Following the Civil War, however, many prominent White suffragists parted company with their former colleagues in the abolitionist movement over the wording of the 15th Amendment (1870). The amendment, which extended voting rights to Black men but not to women of any race, angered suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony so much that they refused to endorse it or work with members of congress who had prioritized Black male rights over women's rights. Seeking new congressional allies in their campaign for women's suffrage, Stanton and Anthony began incorporating racist and nativist language in their writings and speeches to appeal to White southern lawmakers and other conservatives.

Following the deaths of Stanton and Anthony in the early 20th century, a new generation assumed leadership of the women's suffrage movement. Although Black women such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell were effective in organizing Black suffragists in the North, White suffragists ignored or even worked against Black women's voting rights in the South. Most egregiously, Stanton and Anthony's protege Carrie Chapman Catt even promised southern lawmakers that "White supremacy [would] be strengthened, not weakened, by women's suffrage." A canny political operative who tailored her message to specific audiences, Catt tempered her language when campaigning for suffrage in the North, but she nevertheless sought the support of organizations—such as the YWCA and the Woman's

Christian Temperance Union—who practiced racial segregation in both the North and South.

As the 19th Amendment (1920) was nearing ratification, Catt founded the League of Women Voters as a voter registration and education organization for the nation's soon-to-be enfranchised women. For the most part, however, those would be White women. Jim Crow laws at the state and local levels still prevented Black women and men from voting in the South. Similar state and local laws in areas with large Latina and Indigenous populations prevented women in these communities from voting. Asian immigrant women could not vote because federal law prevented them from becoming naturalized citizens. Although women of color remained largely disenfranchised until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its subsequent amendments, the LWW took no part in the southern voter registration campaigns of the 1960s and made no official statement against racial bias until 1966.

LWWAC commits to bold action at the local level to build trust with and welcome **all** persons as members, partners, and participants in LWWAC activities. LWWAC promises to serve the diverse population of Athens County by providing information and programming of use to all residents, regardless of race, income level, religion, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship status, ability status, education or age. Acknowledging the past is merely the first step in creating a different present and a better future.

LWWAC is currently reaching out to other community organizations to determine if we can support their work or perhaps partner on a project. We also invite anyone in the community to reach out to us. We are happy to have a conversation about how we can support you or work together. You can reach us at athensleagueofwomenvoters@gmail.com.

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