



## **Convention 2021 Opening Remarks**

**Stephanie Doute, CAE**

**Executive Director**

**League of Women Voters of California**

Thank you, Carol!

A leadership coach asked me once, "What are you going to do this year to change the world?" I took some time to reflect on it and think about when I am at my most powerful. Introspection and deep thinking are so important in leadership. For all of us, taking time for this kind of self-reflection is critical to understanding how we can bring our best and highest contributions to our work, our teams, and our communities and how we can help others do the same.

So, after a few days of consideration, I finally knew the answer to the question - "What are you going to do this year to change the world?" My answer was, "I am going to work to lift up people - to empower them to follow *their* passions and talents, so that *they* can change the world. I can multiply my impact exponentially by empowering other passionate activists and leaders, and supporting their work and journeys." That has been a guiding principle in my work and life since that moment.

So, many years later, when I saw the League of Women Voters of California looking for a new Executive Director, I felt called. As many of you know, I am not a life long Leaguer. In fact, my professional background is in nonprofit management, communications, community engagement, and building sustainable organizations - and I primarily worked in associations. But I felt called to LWVC. Here, at LWVC, was an opportunity to wake up every day and know that the work I was doing was creating a better world. The work I could do here would empower people across the state to be the change makers *they* want to be.

Together, we work to build equity, to create justice. To create a better future for the planet and our kids and grandkids. At its core, our work is to fight for a better human experience for all Californians, and really, all people. The values and positions of the League lineup so nicely with my own personal values and passions, it seemed a natural fit.

I love the history of the League and where it is today. 100 years of powerful, iconic, everyday women breaking down barriers and fighting for voting rights, civic engagement, and driving social change. At every level of government - in every facet of society. Women whose power was - and is - in their words, their actions, their intellect, their empathy, leadership, their grit - women who never stood down from a challenge. Women who believe. I knew that I wanted to be a part of that legacy as the League goes into the next 100 years.

And, simultaneously, in our League history are women who were flawed and made decisions that caused harm and fed into racial inequity in our state and country. We, as Leagues, have talked a lot over the last few years about the racist history of the League and of the women's suffrage movement. Accepting that our history is rife with these flaws, and making a commitment that we - today and every day going forward- will be better, do better. We'll center diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in all facets of our work. That's the present we embrace and the future we are all working together to build for the League, for California, and for our country. THAT is something that all of you - every League member and every League leader - should be proud of. Acknowledging the deep flaws in something, or someone we love - and even in ourselves - can be one of the hardest things we are faced with as people. And here was League - here IS League - doing the hard work of owning this history and striving to be better every day. It makes me proud to be a part of this - to work with each and every one of you.

I definitely couldn't have predicted what my first year or so would be like as I joined LWVC - no one could! I had big plans! And Just as I was coming around my onboarding learning curve and ready to start running, the world shifted. This is a story you all know.

First, we were hit with COVID. I had barely been with LVWC for 90 days, and suddenly we had to shift all of our operations to remote. I recall sitting around the lunch table with the LWVC staff talking about our first foray into working together remotely. We would do it for 2 weeks, and then revisit to see if it was working or if we wanted to go back to the office. How naive we all were - thinking we could be on the other side of this in 2 weeks! So, like you all, we shifted rapidly to working completely remote. And we created a business continuity plan to be used if/when a crisis hits in the future.

And just when we thought we were figuring out the "new normal", the world changed again. George Floyd was murdered and people took to the streets. Our country was about to begin a long needed racial reckoning. At the League, we had already begun this journey internally. You could see some of our state level efforts, particularly in our policy and advocacy work, as Carol mentioned. But in this moment, after George Floyd's murder, the country stopped. We all stopped. It was a historic moment of raw humanity. Pain. Fear. Anger. Injustice. It was time for us to be immediately present for our League and community members who are directly impacted by these injustices, and for some of us, to learn what it truly means to be an ally and be that. And we were called again to stand up as we saw anti-Asian hate and hate crimes on the rise in California and our country. And we will continue to do that. This is now part of the fabric of who we are as a League.

This is probably a good time for me to tell you that when I sat down to write these remarks, I wrote out everything I wanted to say, and then timed myself speaking - and it was a succinct 17 minutes. Carol laughed and said, "That's really great, but you have 5 minutes" - which I have definitely exceeded now - so I am going to wrap up. As we lead into the coming days of League business, and make critical decisions for our future - I leave you with gratitude. For the opportunity to lead, and lead with you. To learn from you and with you. For the incredible team

of smart, dedicated, hardworking LWVC staff. For the opportunity to be the best version of myself, by supporting you, and League members across the state, in all that you are doing to make a better California and a better world. As I said before, at its heart, our work is about people and changing lives - I am grateful to do this work with all of you.

Let's have a great couple of days as we set the course for the next two years.

**Convention 2021 Closing Remarks**  
**Stephanie Doute, CAE**  
**Executive Director**  
**League of Women Voters of California**

When we opened the Convention, I told you I had 17 minutes of remarks, but only 5 minutes to give them. Carol has graciously granted me some additional time now to share a few parting thoughts. Thank you for that, Carol.

So? Where are we now? We have spent the past two days affirming our values and setting our priorities. Our path is set. We have work to do.

We sometimes take for granted the progress that has been made in California- because in many ways, we are ahead of the curve. But the fights to suppress votes and restrict access to the ballot have found their way into our state and they are not going away. Where California goes, others follow. If we want other states to succeed, we must protect the progress we have made in California - at the local and state levels - and continue to push forward. And if you hear this repeated, it's because it is so very important.

As we discussed during plenary, our work in racial justice and criminal legal system reform - the position on criminal justice that you, LWVC members authored, is being adopted across the country and other states are joining in prioritizing this work. If we have learned nothing this past year, it has laid bare that racial inequity is part and parcel of the criminal legal system and that must end. You, the members of LWVC, have led Leagues nationally on that work - you are creating change across the country by creating change here at home. We must keep pushing forward our work in California to lead the nation by example.

One of the beautiful things about the League, and one of the things that most inspires me is that there is something for nearly everyone. Climate. Housing and homelessness. Water. Criminal legal system reform. Education. Racial justice. Voting rights. Democracy. Nearly anyone can follow their passion with the League and be a changemaker. I have heard a lot of you talk about work on being more inclusive- and reflecting on the ways in which we have been able to do that through the pandemic, and what we will keep from these learnings. I have also heard an intense desire to be an organization that better reflects the population of CA - one in which new

members from all walks of life come to us because they want to be a part of what we do. One in which everyone aligning with our values can find their voice and take action.

To keep evolving into the organization we aspire to become, we have to continue to embrace and expand upon new ways of communicating, meeting, collaborating, volunteering, teaching, learning, mentoring - and above all- we have to act with humanity and kindness to each other. Because no one joins or stays in an organization where they feel like they are not smart enough, can't contribute enough time to be appreciated or valued, feel othered, don't see themselves in leadership roles, or feel that they don't have a voice or are not being heard when they do speak. Together, we have the power to create the League that welcomes and embraces people of all knowledge levels, of all walks of life, of all backgrounds.

Because part of our legacy as leaders is to reach back, open the door, and extend our hand to the next generation of civic leaders who will eventually take over for us. Our legacies, and all that we have worked for, will keep moving forward through them. We have the power to share knowledge and create a culture of inclusion, curiosity, learning, and mentoring. We have the power to create a culture of abundance and gratitude. Abundance of knowledge, abundance of friendships, abundance of mentoring, camaraderie, and collaboration.

Gratitude - for each other. For the people who care about our work. For our new members who bring their new perspective, energy, enthusiasm. And for our members who have been with League for many years for sharing a lifetime of experience and knowledge to help us newbies learn and grow. Gratitude for the people who donate to help us keep our momentum. For the LWVC staff who care so deeply about all of you and your success and our League community. For the people, for all of you, fighting to protect and defend our democracy. There are so many things to be grateful for. And in leadership a gratitude mindset, a mentoring mindset, an abundance mindset, a curiosity mindset - those go a long way to creating more inclusive cultures.

So, again, I leave you with *my* gratitude. The very important work that we do can be difficult, tiring, overwhelming at times, and daunting - and it takes heart and dedication to keep it going. As we leave our first ever virtual Convention, I share gratitude for each and every person here who is striving to build a more inclusive and welcoming League. Who is seeking out ways to engage and mentor new leaders, new members, and youth voices. We share gratitude for all of you who honor the skills and contributions of all of your colleagues. Who give each other grace when things don't go as planned, and support each other in learning from those moments. Who have vision, passion and joy for empowering voters, defending democracy, and making a more just and equitable future for all Californians. The League is a force - and I can't wait to see what we collectively achieve over the next 2 years.