

Sent to State Bd members 8/30/44

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

726 Jackson Place - Washington 6, D.C.

July 1944

Price 10c

LET'S HAVE A DISCUSSION

Why Discuss?

Discussion gives an individual a chance to say what he thinks, to feel that he "belongs" to his community, and that his opinion counts. This is an important step in building up the climate in which a sense of citizen responsibility for government can flourish. To that person, who feels that her ideas don't matter the possibility of influencing others in public discussion is realistic proof that, in a democracy, every opinion matters.

Discussion has another function in addition to building up the participant's sense of responsibility. It tends to modify extreme and unwise points of view—in much the same way that representation of minority groups in government modifies the radical views they may have held before assuming public responsibility.

Discussion promotes mutual understanding; it is one important step in the solving of common problems. It also brings out the fundamental differences of opinion and opposing interests, so that the citizen is better able to make a decision when he is called upon for action.

Discussion clarifies, modifies, enlightens and invigorates.

Discuss What?

The League of Women Voters issues an ideal type of material for promoting discussion in "Memorandum." A Memo is impartial, full of facts, well organized. It is a simplified digest of available materials and opinions on a governmental problem of current interest.

Any discussion group should have some common subject matter or interest before coming together. A Memorandum provides a background of facts and sets forth the various points of view on the subject under discussion. Much fruitless talking beside the point can be avoided if every member of the group has the pertinent Memo in her possession at least a week before coming to the meeting.

Discuss Memos

There are four cogent reasons why your local League will profit from a determined effort to increase the circulation of Memoranda:

1. The more members there are with a background gained from reading Memos, the better attended your discussion group will be.
2. Your average League member will be better informed when the time for action arrives.
3. Participation in a discussion usually makes a person want to rush out and keep talking—to her friends and neighbors.
4. Greater non-partisan citizen interest in the issues of foreign and domestic policy is our only assurance that these issues will be settled in the general welfare.

Your League may now place a standing order for 5 or more copies of each Memo with the National League office. Each Memo will include a discussion guide and bibliography.

The Discussion Leader

Leading a discussion so that the members of the group will derive profit and interest from the time, is a technique much like baking a pie. It involves certain specific steps which can be learned from the cook book on discussion. It involves putting in the right amount of words here and the right kind of words there. It requires an earnest determination to turn out a masterpiece—not just to slap together the ingredients and hope for the best.

It is, of course, impossible to foresee every situation which will arise during your discussion, or to anticipate every point of view which might be expressed. But you can prepare yourself so thoroughly before the meeting that you have an outline of the subject matter etched on your brain, or even written on a paper in front of you. Decide which aspects of the subject you want discussed, and how you are going to lead into each phase of the discussion. It will then be simple enough to fit into the outline any facts or ideas which are new to you.

Read the Memorandum on the subject for discussion until your mind is full of it. Consult your file of TRENDS for recent developments. If you have any other material read it, too, and make a note of ideas not given in the Memo. If the subject is current in the press, a good jumping off place for your discussion is an announcement of the latest news, or the status of any bills in the field.

While you are outlining the various points of view which should be discussed, try to think of people representing each viewpoint whom you could ask to attend the meeting. Having people of different backgrounds, approaching the problem from various angles, puts less strain on the leader and more life into the discussion.

The Leader's Attitude

The most important quality which makes a discussion leader successful is not her brains, or her fund of knowledge, or her ability to speak in public. She can do without all these. But she must have the right attitude toward the members of her group. This right attitude you can cultivate if you will remember the following suggestions:

- 1) You must expect every member of the group, not just two or three members, to contribute something important to the discussion.
- 2) Remember that the function of a leader is to start and coordinate, not to teach or dictate.
- 3) You must honestly believe in the importance and worth of every person in the group.
- 4) You must believe that many problems will be solved by the group better than you could solve them yourself.
- 5) You must continue to be sympathetic with every member no matter how obstructive she may be.
- 6) Realize that each member has had experiences which qualify her to speak with more knowledge on some aspects of the subject than you, no matter how well informed you may be.
- 7) Recognize that frequently expression is a better way of learning than listening. Let the group talk; you listen.

The Discussion Group

The arrangement of chairs in a room can make or break a meeting. The members of the discussion group should be brought as close together as possible, preferably around a rectangular, round or T-shaped table. No one should ever sit behind the leader. And the leader, not the group, should face the light. Twenty persons is as large as an informal discussion group should be; larger groups require more formal handling and more careful planning for assistance from members of the group.

When there are no tables, the group should be arranged in a circle or triangle, so that everyone can see all the members, and an ordinary conversational tone can be heard. It sometimes helps to establish a spirit of informality if, instead of arranging the chairs ahead of time, the leader gets the attention of the group and asks them to rearrange themselves into a circle.

From the time when the first participants enter the room, you as the leader, should try to produce an atmosphere of friendly informality. Speak to each one, ask her name and try to remember it long enough to introduce her to the other members. Consult the group generally about the light, the ventilation, the weather or the hardness of the chairs. This starts a discussion before the serious subject is under consideration, and gets the members accustomed to the sound of their own remarks to that group and in that place. There should be a social and personal tinge to the preliminaries.

The Discussion Begins

You, as the discussion leader, must decide when to begin. You are thoroughly prepared; you know that some if not all of the group has read the Memorandum for background; and you are anxious to know what the group thinks about a subject of great importance and interest. This is the time for you to set the atmosphere of the meeting.

- 1) Relax. Enjoy yourself and the others will be at ease too.
- 2) You are not a school teacher instructing the class, but sit up straight and look alert. Be business-like, but unhurried.
- 3) Be friendly but not familiar.
- 4) Be informal but not haphazard.
- 5) Do not chew your fingernails, kick the table, or scribble on your notes during the discussion.
- 6) Pay attention to each member as she speaks. Don't concentrate on what is coming so hard that you fail to notice what is going on.
- 7) A pertinent joke is invaluable, but a light touch is a good substitute.

Your opening remarks should be brief and to the point. Explain what the subject is and what preparation you hope the group has made. If it has not been practical before to introduce the members to each other, ask each one to give her name. Some leaders may wish to read a set of rules before the discussion begins, something like:

- 1) Let's all talk, but not all at once.
- 2) Let's stick to the subject.
- 3) When we feel a personal anecdote coming on, let's be absolutely certain the story will help the discussion, before we speak.
- 4) Let us be brief.

If the group meets regularly and is used to discussion, it is sometimes helpful to talk about what steps to take in the discussion. But for a new group the leader should prepare her own outline. She may take the group into her confidence, however, and tell them how she has planned the discussion. The members can then be more orderly in presenting their ideas, knowing in advance when a given idea will fit with most telling effect.

Discussion Tricks

There are a number of tricks for starting a discussion. The discussion guides with the Memoranda will give you a variety of these, applied specifically to the subject matter of the Memos.

- 1) You may ask a question, carefully prepared ahead of time to allow for more than one answer. Take care not to answer the question yourself. A minute of silence at this time will seem almost endless, but it pays to wait. When an answer comes, give it your full attention, but give no opinion of your own. Let some other member of the group do the disagreeing.
- 2) A second trick is to prepare ahead of time a few true-false statements. Make a statement and ask the group whether it is true or false. These statements should not be simply facts, but points of view which could be answered either way. Don't let a member subside after saying "true"; ask her why she answered as she did. When the discussion of that statement has died down, go on to the next.
- 3) You may wish to stage a debate if the subject is particularly controversial. You may either assign the opposing sides of the argument arbitrarily to those sitting on opposite sides of the room. Or you may ask for a show of hands assigning the positive to those who want it, the negative to those who take that position. Do not make the debate formal or use a clock. Let each member put forth one idea and then ask if someone on the other side can refute the point.
- 4) Another method of drawing out opinions is to ask a question or make a statement and ask the group to write down all the possible answers to the question, or list the pros and cons of the statement. You can then ask one person, who you know would not be embarrassed to be first, to read her answer. Follow up by asking whether anyone else has any different answers. By this time the discussion is in full swing.
- 5) A slightly different use of the opening statement is to make an erroneous remark attributed to some nameless person you know. Admit that you didn't know quite how to answer the argument of the nameless one, and ask the group how they would have met it.
- 6) If you have arranged ahead of time to have a couple of well-informed persons in your group, they could open the discussion with brief statements of different aspects of the subject. But their statements should be brief, and not so technical that other members lapse into silence for fear of appearing amateurish by comparison. It is always helpful to have an expert in the group, provided that she isn't allowed to monopolize the discussion. It is the leader's job to make the group feel that experts and facts are useful tools, but that non-technical opinions matter too.
- 7) One of the most useful devices for starting the discussion-ball rolling is a chart, map, graph or pictures. For the type of question most frequently discussed by Leaguers, such material may be difficult to find, although public libraries are helpful places. A discussion group on unemployment might find employment graphs or charts at the Chamber of Commerce. Discussions on taxation almost require graphic material, even if decidedly home made and copied from graphs on the financial pages of newspapers or from materials of the U. S. Treasury Department. Inflation is another subject which needs a blown-up chart of price indices. Discussions on aviation, shipping and boundary problems benefit from the use of maps. Consult your friends and other League members for ideas before the meeting.

- 8) A discussion trick sometimes interesting for larger groups is to start with a short round table discussion by three or four members. Arrange to have these members present briefly the background of necessary facts and all possible points of view. Then open the discussion to the whole group, and have one or more members of the larger group tipped off to jump in with an idea. It is up to the leader to play down the three or four members of the round table from here on, and encourage discussion from all the members of the group.

Conducting the Discussion

Once the discussion is under way, the leader's job is to keep it moving down the track. No one should be allowed to make a speech, and this includes the leader. Discussion is give-and-take conversation. If some member becomes long winded, you may break in with something like: "That is an interesting point, Mrs. Blank. Let's hear what some of the others think about that." Or you might suggest that you, personally, would like to pursue the subject with her after the meeting, but that there are still many other points to cover in a limited time.

One of the most difficult persons to handle in a discussion is a woman whose husband's aunt knows a very fascinating man whose daughter had an experience which isn't exactly pertinent, but very interesting all the same—to the teller. Nothing short of chloroform will stop that story, but if personal experiences threaten to become epidemic, be firm in a request please to stick to the point. Say, "I am afraid we are losing the thread of the discussion. We had just decided so and so, and it seems to me the next point we want to consider is this...."

One of the leader's most important functions is to pull the discussion together. Frequent summaries of the points agreed upon so far are helpful in keeping the discussion on the track. When a member does not express herself well, an alert leader can ask, "Are you saying"—followed by a short rephrasing that ties in the remark to the topic being discussed.

A summary at the end of the discussion helps the members to go away feeling that something concrete has been accomplished. When a person has come to a definite conclusion on a subject hitherto vague in her mind, she has new courage to go to others, face to face, and talk about that subject. So it is important that the leader not let the discussion just peter out. She must emphasize the conclusions reached, and send each member away feeling a responsibility to start other people talking, to lend her facts and ideas to her friends, to arouse, to prod, to stir the disinterested—and by so doing, to create responsibility for government in as many individual citizens as possible.

File
National League of Women Voters
726 Jackson Place
Washington 6, D. C.

July 11, 1944

C U E O F T H E W E E K

To how many people will the Bretton Woods monetary conference be a disappointment? There will be those who feel the conference was a failure because their favorite currency plan was voted down, because some of the nations split up into factions, or because so few problems seemed to be settled.

It would help these people to put on some glasses with lenses labelled, "sense of perspective." They would then see clearly that just the fact of holding such a conference is an advanced idea. The era of economic planning on a world-wide rather than a national basis is in its infancy.

The first steps in any period of cooperation between potential friends are those of establishing mutual trust and acquiring the habit of working together. It is only after building this kind of a foundation that it is possible to understand conflicting points of view and to resolve them.

We, therefore, should not expect mature and united action from a development which is still in its exploratory stage. Consequently, the monetary conference can be considered a worthwhile project if all it accomplishes is an exchange of information by people who are willing to consider national problems on an international level.

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National League of Women Voters
726 Jackson Place
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July 25, 1944

C U E O F T H E W E E K

Both parties have presented the foreign policy planks of their platforms to the public. Between now and November these words will be the focal points for interpretation by the important candidates. In judging the trend toward and away from full international cooperation, watch for indications of what these statements will come to mean.

Democratic

"We pledge: To join with the other United Nations in the establishment of an international organization based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving States, open to membership by all such States, large and small, for the prevention of aggression and the maintenance of international peace and security;

"To make all necessary and effective agreements and arrangements through which the nations would maintain adequate forces to meet the needs of preventing war and of making impossible the preparation for war and which would have such forces available for joint action when necessary.

"Such organization must be endowed with power to employ armed forces when necessary to prevent aggression and preserve peace."

Republican

"We shall seek to achieve such aims [peace and freedom based on justice and security] through organized international cooperation and not by joining a world state.

"We favor responsible participation by the United States in postwar cooperative organization among sovereign nations to prevent military aggression and to attain permanent peace with organized justice in a free world.

"Such organization should develop effective cooperative means to direct peace forces to prevent or repel military aggression. Pending this, we pledge continuing collaboration with the United Nations to assure these ultimate objectives."

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Since the recent poll indicated that less than one-third of those who receive standing orders of "Cue of the Week" desired their continuance, the series will cease with this issue.

File
National League of Women Voters
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Washington 6, D. C.

June 26, 1944

C U E O F T H E W E E K

The period of party conventions and political campaigning can have a dangerous tendency to sabotage the efforts of those who believe in international cooperation. Secretary Hull has said, "Under our constitutional system the will of the American people is not effective unless it is united will ... We are in a year of national election in which it is easy to arouse controversy on almost any subject, whether or not the subject is an issue in the campaign."

It is always easier to criticize than to be constructive, but we must realize that such tactics now may well be a deathblow to our effectiveness among the other nations of the world. If some agreement can be reached among the American people on the objectives to be attained, we will be able to carry great influence abroad. The kind of solidarity that is necessary must be forged on a higher plane than party politics--plans must not be judged on the basis of whether they are Democratic or Republican, but whether they contribute to the goal of international cooperation. Partisanship cannot be allowed to enter the field, even though its exclusion requires rigid self discipline.