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National Nonpartisan League

A word that unlocks much of the National Nonpartisan League's history is diffusion. The NNPL was founded after commercial farmers in North Dakota mobilized behind a program of government intervention into the North Dakota economy. In 1916 the North Dakota Nonpartisan League successfully used the North Dakota Republican primary to capture control of most of North Dakota's executive offices. This success generated enormous optimism among the League's top leaders about the possibilities for repeating their "boring from within" tactics in other states. The North Dakota League's leaders decided to found a national organization for diffusing the North Dakota model to other states.

Headquarters of the NNPL were established in 1917 in St. Paul, Minnesota. From there the NNPL's top staff oversaw a sizable dissemination of propaganda for the organization of commercial (and in certain places tenant) farmers in north central, northwestern, southwestern, and western states. The premise of the National Nonpartisan League's staff was that state Leagues would quickly emerge if the NNPL provided an initial supply of organizers, money, and expertise. These areas were assumed to be full of discontented farmers waiting for political leaders capable of articulating their discontents. The NNPL also assumed that in those states a significant number of industry workers would also be attracted to the League's attacks on "Big Biz" and to its calls for public policies that would protect self-organization by workers.

The League's investment of political resources was a significant factor in the formation of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (1918–1944), the Washington Farmer-Labor Party (1920–1924), the Idaho Progressive Party (1922–1926), and the Oklahoma Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League (1922). Upton Sinclair's EPIC (End Poverty In California) platform (1934) for his California gubernatorial campaign was patterned after the NNPL, since Sinclair strongly admired the League.

The League enjoyed friendly relations with President Woodrow Wilson (1912–1920). But

the League had little direct impact on national public policy despite calls for institutionalizing those federal controls over the economy that Wilson had established. At the state level, however, the League had a far greater impact. It often shaped public policy even in the face of state and local accusation of radicalism, although in certain cases repression badly crippled it. The League had a lasting impact on credit markets—North Dakota established a state bank still in existence, and Minnesota and South Dakota both adopted rural credits in the post-WWI recession. Moreover, in Minnesota the League played a key role in the establishment of a modest level of iron ore taxation. League leaders envisioned a regional industrial policy—high, almost confiscatory iron ore taxes would force steel mills and automobile plants to locate in Minnesota or western Wisconsin. As a result, farmers would have larger and nearer urban markets, and trade unions would grow in strength.

See also: Woodrow Wilson

Richard M. Vellely

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National Organization for Women

Organized in 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) is the largest national feminist organization in the U.S. While the modern civil rights movement was well along in the 1940s, many of the women's organizations active during the suffrage movement had either ceased to exist or were in historian Jo Freeman's words, "a pale shadow of their former selves by the late 1950s." With no existing women's organization poised to take action, NOW was formed after the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission refused to enforce the "sex" provision for equality of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Betty Friedan, one of the founding members, became NOW's first president. Originally formed to lobby the executive branch, NOW grew rapidly as a grass-roots membership organization: between 1967 and 1974, NOW grew from 1,000 members in 14 chapters to 40,000 members in over 700 chapters. While organized on a federal basis, the