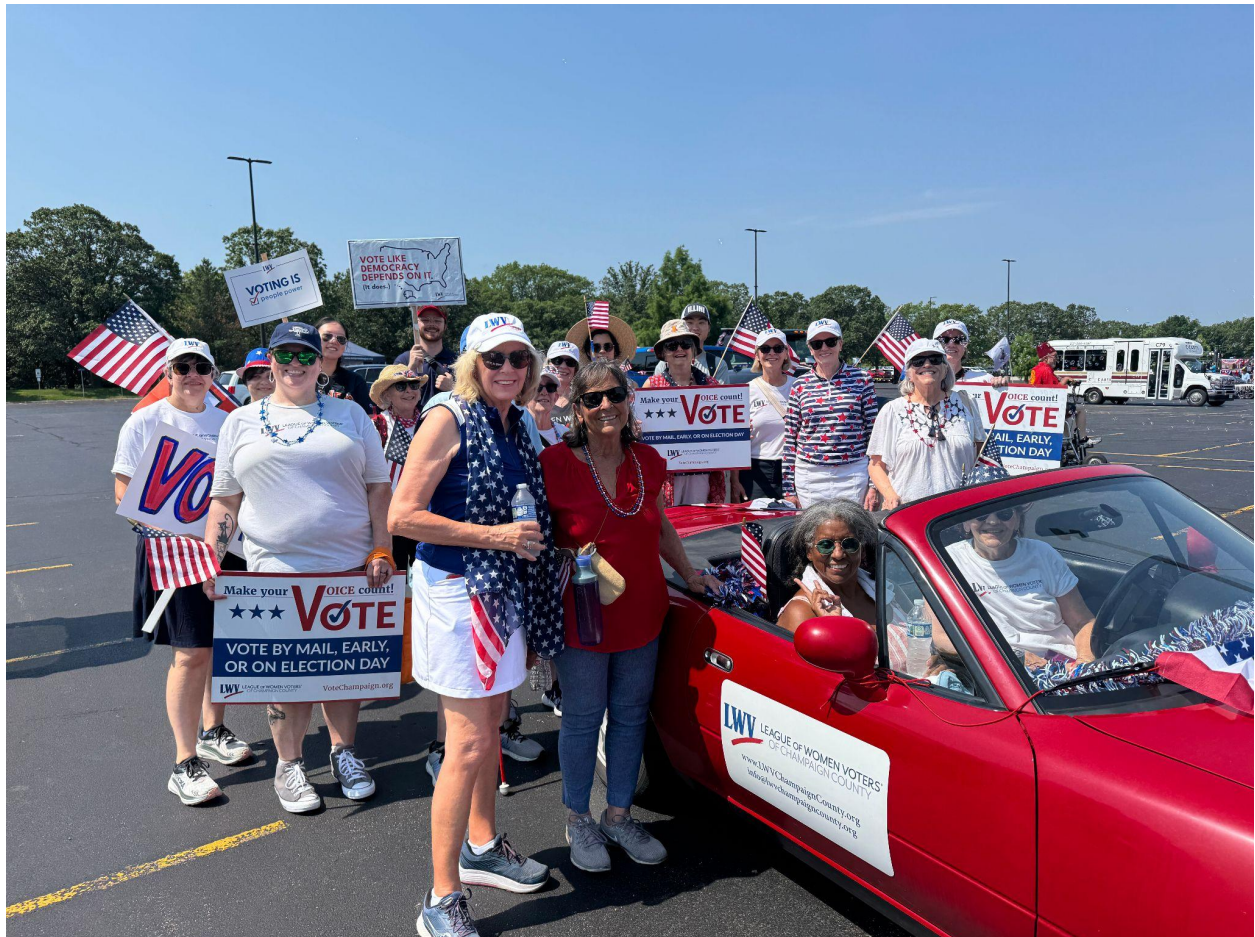


‘Can we march with you?’

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University of Illinois international graduate students and postdoc researchers joined the League of Women Voters crew during the Champaign County Freedom Celebration Parade. Photo provided by Ann Prisland.

We were in the southwest parking lot of the State Farm Center in Champaign, more than 20 League of Women Voters members patiently waiting in a 95 degrees heat index for the start of the 2026 Champaign County Freedom Celebration Parade, to celebrate America's 250th birthday.

We had decorated our one vehicle, a red sportscar, with red, white and blue streamers and a sign that said League of Women Voters of Champaign County. We were armed

with American flags, voting related signs and bags of candy, ready to greet the crowd along the parade route.

Dressed in a mix of League and Fourth of July clothing, we were prepared for the parade to begin. Our assignment was number 10 so we would be among the first in line when the horn sounded at 11:05 a.m.

Then an unexpected group approached us.

Five young adults made their way over and explained that they had emailed several parade groups hoping they could join them in the parade. When none of their messages received a response, they decided to take a chance: to just show up in person and find a group willing to welcome them.

Seeing our group waiting to march, and with one of the students somehow knowing the League of Women Voters is nonpartisan, they thought this is a group that might be willing to say yes.

We were.

We welcomed them into our group, sharing our signs, flags, and candy. As we talked, we learned they were University of Illinois graduate students and post-doctoral researchers. International students, three women and two men, from countries around the world.

Because we needed someone with a strong voice, we recruited one of the young men to lead our parade chant. As he called out, "Make your voice count" we replied, "VOTE!".

Along the two-mile parade route, we got to know one another between handing out candy, waving flags, and wishing spectators a happy 250th birthday. What began as a chance encounter quickly became something more meaningful.

As a 100-percent German American, I was especially delighted when I found myself marching alongside a young woman from Germany. She told me that she, and the other international students, never imagined they would one day be walking in an American parade. They loved the energy of the event, the children waving as we passed, and the feeling of taking part in such a uniquely American experience.

They were astonished that they were part of celebrating America's 250th birthday in this way. Not from the sidelines, but as participants.

When we reached the end of the route at the corner of Illinois and Lincoln Streets in Urbana, the students asked if we would share photos from the parade. They wanted to send the pictures home to their families - to show parents, siblings, and friends in their

home countries that they had celebrated America's 250th birthday by marching in a Fourth of July parade in central Illinois.

They loved walking with us.

We loved having them alongside us.

And none of it would have happened if they hadn't felt comfortable approaching a group of American strangers and asking, "Can we march with you?" And if they hadn't known that the League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization committed to helping citizens who are legally eligible to exercise their right to vote.

I have no idea of their political leanings and if they even vote in their home countries. Yet, the League welcomes everyone to learn about American civic life. And what better expression of civic life is there than marching in a community Fourth of July parade.

It made me think about all the experiences we miss, all the doors we close, and all the relationships that never have a chance to develop when partisanship becomes more important than human connection.

I am also finding myself thinking about the parents of the international students when they receive the parade photos. Seeing their sons and daughters being welcomed into a community celebration halfway around the world, perhaps America 2026 will seem a little more open, a little more friendly, and a little more welcoming.

And perhaps that's another kind of patriotism worth celebrating.

Carol Bosley, a Champaign resident, is a founding member of the Braver Angels Alliance of East Central Illinois and Board Member of the League of Women Voters of Champaign County.

This is the 24th installment of a [series of "Braver Conversations" columns](#). Braver Angels is a national organization dedicated to bringing Americans together to bridge the partisan divide, with a local presence in East Central Illinois.