

Our Democracy Uncorrupted

*America begins in black plunder and white democracy,
two features that are not contradictory but complementary.*

-Ta-Nehisi Coates

Democracy in the U.S. has always been compromised. At the Nation's very founding, participation in governance was almost entirely limited to white male landowners. Wealth was created from those excluded: the seizure of land from indigenous peoples who were forcibly assimilated or removed and exterminated, enslaved Africans, and exploited labor from indentured servants, immigrants, prisoners, and the working poor.

As people of faith committed to "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," we must strive toward uncorrupted democracy. As a means to an end, democracy organizes decision-making among diverse people and preserves stability while balancing competing interests. But democracy is not merely a means. It is an end in itself, an ethical ideal, a moral and spiritual way of relating to one another.

The promise of democracy is for a life that fashions us as the people we want to be. Terry Tempest Williams calls us to be resolute and courageous in our trust: "Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?" If democracy has sometimes seemed, as Winston Churchill said, "the worst form of government except for all those other forms," it is because democracy has been limited and constrained – merely a means for giving powerful interests the appearance of legitimacy.

Government by and for the people formally entails majority rule, with the majority's power limited by protection of the rights of those in the minority. Democratic government should include:

- universal voting rights with high voter participation rates;
- free, fair, competitive, and frequent elections;
- beyond voting, widely used and meaningful channels of political participation open to all;
- access to accurate information and diverse media;
- policies and processes accountable to the voters, not to special interests;
- basic individual liberties that include freedom of speech, press, and religion;
- leaders who reflect the racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and class diversity of the population;
- an independent judiciary and adherence to the rule of law;
- policies implemented by those duly authorized; and
- freedom from influence of foreign or external powers or corporate corruption.

Democracy is not only rules and systems, it is the culture and commitments of the people and of those entrusted with carrying out the will of the people. A truly democratic culture requires:

- transparency and radical inclusivity (intentional deep listening, attending to the concerns of the most vulnerable, and caring about inclusion and exclusion);

- cooperation, multi partisanship, and decision-making through consensus-building;
- accountability and accessibility, being responsive to the public good versus special interests;
- public officials being held to a high standard of ethical and fiduciary responsibility; and
- respect for the rights and needs of those in the minority.

The Nation's founding documents expressed inspiring ideals of democratic equality. Unequal valuation, however, has undermined our country's prospects for living the promise of true democracy: white people are valued more than people of color, men more than women, the rich more than the poor. These valuations, enshrined in law and custom, amplify the power of the advantaged and the advantages of the powerful, and continue to undercut our expressed ideals.

The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments of 1865-1870, the 17th Amendment of 1913, the 19th Amendment of 1920, and civil rights legislation in the 1960s represented expansions of voting rights. Yet, our laws and systems continue to protect privilege and maintain value gaps. White supremacist values and practices permeate America's 400-year history. Supremacist values continue today through policies that disproportionately lower voter participation among peoples of color, people with low income, youth, and other disadvantaged people. Such policies include denial of voting rights for people convicted of felonies, voter ID requirements, and restrictions on early voting opportunities. In addition, gerrymandering limits the electoral power of people of color and of less powerful political parties. It can also move legislators further to the extremes, reducing their desire to cooperate or compromise.

The outsized influence of wealthy individuals and corporations on elections, always a corruption of democracy, has worsened in recent decades. The costs of campaigning in the U.S. have skyrocketed, increasing legislators' debt to large donors. Over centuries, the outsized impact of wealth has created a narrow two party system, excluding vibrant progressive, socialist, and labor movements. Additionally, Supreme Court decisions struck down attempts to limit the influence of money in politics: *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) ruled that spending is a protected form of speech, and *Citizens United* (2010) ruled that corporations are people and therefore their campaign spending may not be restricted. Understanding our democracy requires examining how structural racism, sexism, money, environmental exploitation, militarization, and other systemic forms of oppression that contribute to accumulation of wealth and consolidation of political power.

At the Association level, Unitarian Universalists also fall short of democratic ideals. The cost and time required to participate in our annual General Assembly exclude many from association-level decision-making. Our voting procedures sometimes limit important conversations. The formal procedures often feel cumbersome; they are rooted in parliamentary rules that reflect a competitive orientation. Informal procedures have not addressed the problem. Excluding people of color from the creation of processes has distanced them from engagement. Informal systems rely on organizational cultures that not everyone has knowledge of or is able to access.

Congregations vary in governance and decision-making processes from top-down and hierarchical to more egalitarian. At both the Associational and congregational levels, realizing true democracy requires expanding to include more diverse voices.

Theological/Religious Grounding

“We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote . . . the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

Two phrases here warrant attention: *Within our congregations*. The 1648 Cambridge Platform laid the foundation for Unitarian Universalist polity, establishing the autonomy of congregations. Congregational polity puts democratic practice at the center of governance. Our shared religious life depends on honoring every member’s voice and vote.

Society at large. Our religious commitments extend beyond our congregations’ walls. Excluding our neighbors’ voices impoverishes our souls; hearing all voices expands our spirits. Our faith calls us to live into the requirements of real democracy.

Our theology locates healing and wholeness in relationship, in contrast to a theology of sin that sees human nature as fundamentally corrupt. Our tradition locates hope for addressing social problems not in the suppression of basic sinfulness but in building connections open to diverse perspectives. Another source of our religious movement is the Protestant Reformation’s response to the corruption of a church that sold the promise of heaven for a price. Today in our secular politics we face the parallel corruption in which power, rather than heaven, is sold to those who meet the price.

Actions We Could Take

Achieving the ideals of our faith related to democracy, requires new approaches for mobilizing power and influence. This means engaging in radical truth-telling, intersectional organizing, and naming the forces that resist democratic reforms. A truly inclusive democracy challenges the exploitation of peoples and natural resources by corporate and political power. Our collective future calls us to live into what Unitarian theologian Rev. James Luther Adams named “the prophethood of all believers.”

Individuals can take actions such as the following.

- Conduct a personal democracy audit. Review our relationships with systems that perpetuate consolidation of wealth and power, i.e. investment choices.
- Seek out varied and reliable sources of information.
- Support electoral justice campaigns led by community organizers of color with voter registration, particularly among underrepresented populations.
- Contribute time, talent, and money to democracy-building efforts and to non-profit civic organizations that represent economically oppressed or marginalized people.
- Direct action toward democratic reforms and integrity through rallies, community organized events, advocacy and contacts with elected officials. Specific goals include:
 - public financing of campaigns including independent and third party candidates, elimination of corporate donation, and establishment of a small donor matching system;
 - expanding ballot access, i.e. early voting, access to polling places, same day voter registration and automatic voter registration;
 - eliminating the electoral college;
 - ensuring voting integrity with paper ballot backups;
 - eliminating gerrymandering, partisan redistricting, and other forms of voter suppression;
 - allowing people with felony convictions to vote;

- implementing ranked choice (proportional voting), reinstating the 1965 Voting Rights Act provisions, and strengthening the Federal Elections Commission; and
- amending the Constitution to overturn Citizens United and end corporate personhood.

Congregations/covenanted communities can take actions such as the following.

- Conduct a congregational democracy audit that includes any practices that continue to sustain white supremacy and income inequality. Take action to address findings.
- Organize action groups based on the needs of democratic reform and investigate how structural racism, sexism, classism, environmental degradation, and militarization have driven the accumulation of wealth and political power.
- Partner with other UU congregations and with other faith communities, non-profits, and unions to work on democratic reforms.
- Support the Declaration for American Democracy campaign for comprehensive federal and state democracy reform.
- Organize advocacy initiatives such as postcards, social media campaigns, rallies, sit-ins, petition drives, and other forms of direct action in support of democratic reforms.
- Sponsor educational forums about factors contributing to the corruption of democracy.
- As part of the offering or special collections, ask for funds to support democracy-strengthening efforts.
- Adopt resolutions supporting democratic reforms.
- Collaborate with ongoing UU-related partnerships such as UUSJ's "Write Here! Write Now!" campaign for democracy reform.
- Include children and youth of the congregation in conversations and invite them to join actions.

Clusters, districts, or state legislative ministries can take actions such as the following.

- Advocate for state level democracy reform legislation, voter rights, access, and participation as advocacy priorities.
- Create and publish report cards on state or local legislators' records on campaign financing and issues impacting voter rights, access, and participation.
- Host non-partisan forums that alert congregations and the public to issues related to democratic processes, and information about issues and candidates.
- Connect congregations that are advocating for democratic reform at the state, local or national level.
- Use a variety of advocacy tools including media communications, social media, and meetings with legislators to advocate for issues such as voting rights for people with felony convictions, campaign finance reform, and election security.
- Study gerrymandering issues within the state and advise advocates about recommended actions to ensure fair representation.
- Monitor and work to prevent privatization efforts and insist on accountability from existing contractors that provide services, such as, private prisons, schools, and "welfare to work" programs.

The UUA can take actions such as the following.

- Conduct periodic association-wide democracy audits that include any practices that continue to sustain white supremacy, sexism, and classism. Take action to address the findings.

- 167 ● Invest in state legislative ministries and advocacy at the national level.
- 168 ● Participate in the democracy-supporting movements such as WeDemandDemocracy.org.
- 169 ● Participate in interfaith and multiracial coalitions and other social justice groups that work
- 170 toward achieving democratic reforms.
- 171 ● Follow the lead of communities of color advocacy and political action groups including the
- 172 cultivation and support of candidates for elected office.
- 173 ● Advocate for democratic reforms, including the limiting of money in politics and amending
- 174 the constitution to eliminate corporations as persons.
- 175 ● Provide resources for member congregations that promote effective democratic engagement.
- 176 ● Actively explore opportunities for virtually engaging more Unitarian Universalists in the
- 177 Association's governance.
- 178 ● Continue refining the Association's collective democratic decision-making processes with
- 179 tools such as, ranked choice voting.

180 Rev. Barbara Pescan expressed both our debt and our ongoing responsibility to preceding
181 generations: "Because of those who came before, we are; in spite of their failings, we believe;
182 because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision, we, too dream." The Nation's founders
183 pointed in the direction of a horizon they themselves could not see. It falls now to us to make real
184 the dream of democracy uncorrupted, a government truly of the people, by the people, and for
185 the people.