



Democracy Action Team Board Report, December 2021

Active Members: Fred Van Deusen, convener, First Parish in Concord, MA; Donna Scheidt, UU Church of Greensboro, NC; David Shilton, UU Church of Arlington, VA; Ursula Scott, River Road, Bethesda, MD; Julia Sayles, UU Church of Arlington, Falls Church, VA; Ken Mitchell, First Unitarian of Baltimore, MD; Dee Ellison, UU of Arlington, Falls Church, VA; Tony Giordano, UU Congregation of Monmouth County, Lincroft, NJ; Deb Bauder, Edmonds, WA UU Congregation

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Voting Rights Legislation

Our team is currently very much involved in congressional efforts to pass two critical voting rights bills.

The latest version of the *For the People Act*, called the [Freedom to Vote Act](#) was introduced in the Senate on September 14. Senator Manchin and a number of other Senate Democrats created this latest revision. It's a very strong voting rights bill that addresses many of the concerns that we heard from Republican senators. However, it is unlikely to gain the 10 Republican votes needed to avoid a filibuster.

The [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#) was introduced in the House on August 17 and it passed on August 24. It was introduced in the Senate on October 5. On November 3 the bill failed to pass the Senate after failing to get the 60 votes needed to invoke cloture. It would restore the protections of the *1965 Voting Rights Act* against discriminatory voting laws. It is important to understand that we need both the *Freedom to Vote Act* and the *John Lewis Act* to pass. The *Freedom to Vote Act* sets the minimum requirements that states must meet, and the *John Lewis Act* protects our rights and provides a remedy when required.

September: Write Here! Write Now! and Congressional Visits

In September we worked on the [UUSJ Write Here! Write Now!](#) letter-writing campaign which focused on these two voting rights bills. More than 100 people attended our Expert Opinion Briefing on September 15 that included speakers Andrea Williams of Center for Common Ground and Sister Quincy Howard from Faithful Democracy. A video is available [HERE](#), and a list of potential actions to take [HERE](#).

Also during September we arranged meetings with both House and Senate staffers to advocate for the two bills and learn more about the paths they were expected to take through the Senate. We met staffers with Representatives Sarbanes (sponsor of *For the People Act*) & Sewell

(sponsor of *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act*); Republican senators Tillis, Grassley, Cornyn, & Wicker; Democratic senators Klobuchar (sponsor of *Freedom to Vote Act*), Sinema, Warnock, Baldwin, Kaine & Hassan; and Independent King. After the meetings it was clear to us that filibuster reforms will very likely be necessary in order to pass the two bills. Most of the Republican senator's offices we talked with complained about the federal overreach of the *Freedom to Vote Act* and said that states should have the ability to decide the various voting and redistricting issues. On the *John Lewis Act*, their main concerns were with the preclearance formulas, particularly if they thought their state could be subject to preclearance.

October: Voting Rights Action of Immediate Witness

At the UU General Assembly in June members of the Democracy Action Team authored an Action Of Immediate Witness (AIW), a resolution to [Stop Voter Suppression and Partner for Voting Rights and a Multiracial Democracy](#). On October 6 we participated in a Fall Social Witness Convening organized by Side With Love.

FALL SOCIAL WITNESS CONVENING



Wednesday, Oct 13
7-9 pm ET / 4-6 pm PT
Register: bit.ly/CSW-convening2

The COVID-19 Pandemic:
Justice. Healing. Courage.

Undoing Systemic White Supremacy:
A Call to Prophetic Action

Wednesday, Oct 6
7-9 pm ET / 4-6 pm PT
Register: bit.ly/CSW-convening1

Defend and Advocate with Transgender,
Nonbinary, and Intersex Communities

Stop Voter Suppression and
Partner for Voting Rights and a
Multiracial Democracy



www.uua.org/action/process/csais/fall-social-witness-convening

November: Additional Visits With Senate Offices

Following up on our September Write Here! Write Now! Campaign and our 11 visits with Senate offices, we decided to continue our advocacy of the *Freedom to Vote Act* and the *John Lewis*

Voting Rights Advancement Act.with six additional Senate office visits in November. We focused on moderate Republican senators:

1. Murkowski (R-AK),
2. Shelby (R-AL),
3. Collins (R-ME),
4. Portman (R-OH),
5. Toomey (R-PA), and
6. Cassidy (R-LA).

With a lot of effort, and with assistance from the Immigration Justice Team and members of Faithful Democracy, we succeeded in recruiting constituents and meetings with all six.

Our visits In November were informative and useful. All of the senators agreed that voting is a fundamental right. The main disagreement we continued to hear was about “federal overreach” - the new regulations are too restrictive in some areas and states should have more flexibility in their implementation.

Several visits stand out. In Senator Murkowski’s office we met with Devin O’Brien, Legislative Aide, and Kate Stern, Deputy Chief of Staff. Senator Murkowski has been the lone Republican in support of the John Lewis Act. She wants to continue work on that legislation to gain additional bipartisan support. Her concern with the Freedom to Vote Act is that it is too prescriptive. Smaller towns in Alaska don’t need or want 15 ten hour days of early voting. After meeting with Senator Murkowski’s staff, we mentioned to other offices that Senator Murkowski is continuing to work on the John Lewis Act, and several offices said they were supportive of that effort.

We met with Mike Wakefield, Senior Counsel for Senator Collins of Maine. Mike told us the senator agrees with making it easier to vote, but also understands that all states are a bit different and does not want undue burdens placed on the states. Senator Collins supports campaign finance disclosure, disclosure of foreign contacts, and resources for election security. She is concerned about federal mandates such as having polling places at each college campus, and the new John Lewis pre-clearance formula. She has had many discussions about the John Lewis bill. We heard from Sen. Portman’s office that he also supports efforts to make it a bipartisan bill, and is interested in making it easier to vote.

The Filibuster

In spite of Sen. Murkowski’s efforts to gain support for the John Lewis bill, it appears very unlikely that there is sufficient Republican support to pass the bill with 60 votes, and the Freedom to Vote Act is even less likely to gain that level of support.

We have heard that discussions are taking place within the Democratic Caucus about possible changes to the filibuster rules to enable these bills to pass with 51 votes. Please see this new [Politico article](#) about voting rights legislation. It appears that January is the time frame for filibuster reform/voting rights bills and that Sen. Manchin’s support may be forthcoming. The filibuster exception the Senate just created for the debt ceiling makes this more likely.

The Brookings Institute recently released an interesting report [Filibuster Reform is Coming - Here’s How](#). It seems clear that Senate Democrats will have to make a decision — which is more important: saving our democracy or preserving an anti-democratic, dysfunctional tool (the

filibuster). If you would like to learn more about dysfunction in the Senate I recommend [*Kill Switch: The Rise of the Modern Senate and the Crippling of American Democracy*](#) by Adam Gentleson.

Partnerships

It is critical to our future success that we continue to build on our national relationships with organizations such as Faithful Democracy and Side With Love - UU the Vote. We have had good success with both of these groups and need to continue to develop these relationships, and also see what other potential partnerships exist. On Sunday, Sep. 12, Side With Love launched their [Action Center](#), and highlighted our Sept. 15 event in their discussion on democracy actions. We have had a wonderful and productive relationship with Faithful Democracy but their funding source is drying up and their outstanding Coordinating Director and her very able assistant are leaving the organization at the end of the year. Faithful Democracy members are discussing ways to continue and we should support that effort if we can. The Faithful Democracy working group of the Washington Interfaith Staff Community (WISC), which gave rise to the campaign, will continue.

We also need to develop relationships with Senate offices and congregations in a number of key states that will have an important impact on our democracy concerns. It is particularly important to be able to recruit constituents for our meetings with Senate and House staffers. In some cases State Action Networks (SAN) will be helpful in supporting our efforts, and in others they either do not exist, or are focused only on activities within their states. (One SAN even has a hard and fast “no federal engagement” policy, which applies to even referrals.)

The DAT feels this is an opportunity for the various action teams to collaborate. In our November meetings we collaborated very successfully with the Immigration Action Team, and even managed to have two joint meetings with Senate offices when the same staffer covered both of our groups. Our thanks go out to the IAT!

Looking Forward

If the two major democracy bills manage to pass we will likely shift our attention to the DC Statehood bill and other proposed democracy legislation including an anti-corruption bill. We'll also have a major celebration with all of our partners.

If they don't pass we'll work with our partners to figure out next steps. Some DAT volunteers have shown interest in state level work on redistricting. On an encouraging note, the DOJ has started suing states over changes in their voting laws and gerrymandering.