



## Democracy Action Team Board Report, June, 2022

**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; 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; Teresa DeSousa, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair, NJ

**ExOfficio member:** Pablo DeJesús, Executive Director

### Voting Rights Legislation

Our focus for the first half of the year was on voting rights legislation - the Freedom to Vote: John Lewis Act. After the Senate failed to protect fundamental voting rights when it filibustered the FTV:JLA in January, the UUSJ Democracy Action Team (DAT) turned its attention to essential democracy protections that have a reasonable chance of passing in the short-term.

The most promising of these is the bipartisan work to **modernize the Electoral Count Act**. This act would update, tighten and clarify the Electoral Count Act (ECA) of 1887, which has long provided the framework governing the casting and counting of electoral votes for the presidency, including the role of Congress and the vice president. Reforming the ambiguous 1887 ECA would serve to avert much of the chaos and misinformation that has been prevalent following the 2020 election.

There is a bipartisan committee working on the ECA, and as part of this work there is a bipartisan subcommittee working on adding voting rights to this bill. In March the Democracy Action Team conducted several intelligence gathering meetings with Senate staff members to try to determine what is likely to be included in the bill, and when it is likely to be introduced. We supplemented our meetings with several meetings set up by Faithful Democracy on the same topic. We heard a wide range of potential timing for the introduction of the bill from June, 2022 to any time before the 2024 elections. Potential content was still under discussion and staffers were either not knowledgeable about the details or unwilling to provide them. They did set our expectations that very little if any content of the Freedom to Vote: John Lewis Act will be included. Republican members of the committee refuse to “re-litigate the FTV: JLA”.

We are now moving forward with a new set of meetings with members of the bipartisan committee (see Write Here! Write Now! below) to advocate for its timely passage, fearing that further delays may wind up killing the bill entirely.

While reform of the Electoral Count Act is certainly needed, it remains vital that federal voting rights action be taken. According to the Brennan Center, between January 1 and May 4, six state legislatures — Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma — have passed nine election interference laws. As of May 4, at least 17 such bills introduced this year

are still moving through five state legislatures. Since the beginning of 2021, 18 states have passed 34 restrictive voting laws, which can [disproportionately affect voters of color](#).

On the plus side, at the same time, four states, Arizona, Connecticut, New York, and Oregon have enacted five laws that expand access to the vote, and many other states are considering expansive legislation.

## Education Events

In the past four months we have hosted or co-sponsored a number of education events focused on the current state of our democracy.

On February 17 we hosted a Zoom event titled ***State of Our US Democracy: A UU View from Texas***. Texas Rep. **Donna Howard (Austin)** was the main speaker. She described the current situation of voting rights in Texas, and discussed her trip with other state Democrats to Washington, DC to prevent Texas Republicans from passing voting rights restrictions. [Here is a link to the event video.](#)

On March 31 and April 12 we collaborated with the Reclaim Our Democracy group at First Parish in Concord, MA to co-sponsor a two event series titled ***Democracy as a Spiritual Practice***. Here is the writeup for the events.

Join us for a compelling two-part series on [Democracy as a Spiritual Practice](#). Our first program - ***Strengthening our Civic Muscles*** - explores authoritarian regimes through the lens of Timothy Snyder's book *On Tyranny* with Rev. Patrick McLaughlin from the UU Church of Manchester NH. We encourage attendees to read this short book prior to the session. [Here is a link to the event video.](#)

The second session, ***After the Protests***, explores the ways in which we can engage and rebuild our civic society to bring our democracy back into balance. This program is led by the Rev. Sharon Welch, professor and author of numerous books (including *After the Protests*), and First Parish in Concord's Social Action Manager, Rev. Paul Langston-Daley. [Here is a link to the event video.](#)

On May 11, the UUSJ Democracy Action Team co-sponsored an **event led by Danielle Allen titled *Partnering for Democracy in Massachusetts and Beyond***. Danielle is a distinguished author, Harvard professor, and recent candidate for Governor of Massachusetts. [Here is a link to the event video.](#)

On May 17 approximately 50 UUs from around the country joined us to hear an ethics presentation from **Justine Ellis of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington**. She discussed ways to bring government ethics into our social justice conversations. Rules and laws help keep our public officials accountable, but equally important are the norms and expectations that we have for their conduct. It's important to ground our conversations in relevant UU principles.

When thinking about ethics in government it is also useful to think about the sources and spheres of influence on us and on our leaders. It can tell us a lot about how we are grounded as we work to influence those around us. And it can also tell us a lot about those we are trying to influence.

## **DAT Planned Actions June - November**

### ***Write Here! Write Now! (WHWN)***

We are currently planning and preparing materials for our June WHWN effort advocating for the Electoral Count Act. On the current list of offices we will try to visit are Sen. Manchin, Murphy, Shaheen, Collins, Capito, Portman, Murkowski and Tillis.

### **UU the Vote**

The UUSJ Democracy Action Team is organizing a **support group for UU the Vote Congregation Leaders**. We will provide a forum where group members can meet, discuss their concerns, and share various actions they can promote in support of the UU the Vote 2022 program. We will provide useful online materials and organize some supporting events.

Our first meeting will be Thursday, June 16 at 7:00pm. If you are interested in participating, please [click on this link to register and receive the event Zoom information](#).