



Democracy Action Team Board Report, January. 2023

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, Pat Marr, UU Church of Long Beach, CA, Michael Thoryn, Silver Spring, MD

ExOfficio member: Pablo DeJesús, Executive Director

2022 Accomplishments

Our focus in 2021 and early 2022 was on voting rights legislation. After the Senate failed to protect fundamental voting rights when it filibustered the Freedom to Vote: John Lewis Voting Rights Act in January, the UUSJ Democracy Action Team (DAT) turned its attention to essential democracy protections that had a reasonable chance of passing in the short-term.

The most promising of these was the bipartisan work to **modernize the Electoral Count Act** that did indeed pass as part of the reconciliation package at the end of 2022. This act updated, tightened and clarified 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 serves to avert much of the chaos and misinformation that was prevalent following the 2020 election.

At our last meetings our team developed a list of our accomplishments for the year:

- Made good inroads in senators' offices, often getting to the top level. Offices we met with included Senators Collins, Kaine, Sinema, Manchin, Portman, Shaheen, Murkowski, Murphy and Durbin.
- Participated actively with FTV: JRL Voting Rights Act - built relationships with Faithful Democracy and DFAD
- Developed a successful WHWN / Action Alert on ECRA: 1197 people sent 1742 messages. We continued to use the Action Alert throughout the year.
- Held a number of well attended events - Donna Howard, Andrea Miller, Lee Drutman, and collaborated with the Reclaim Our Democracy team at First Parish in Concord for several more. We also organized an event with the Moore vs. Harper legal team for the very important states' rights Supreme Court case. North Carolina legislators are asking the court to grant them unfettered power to set rules for voting and elections, without state constitutional limits.
- Convened people to watch the January 6 hearings
- Organized and ran two successful meetings with UU the Vote Congregation leaders; provided a regularly updated list of opportunities for local UU the Vote action teams. The DC area congregations made use of this list, including it in their web page calendar

- We held two successful Action Hour Calling events to Senate offices to advocate for the ECRA. These were well received by both the receivers of the calls and those who participated in making the calls. We even recruited a new person for our DAT team who participated in the calls.

Strategies and Activities for 2023

We met on January 18 to discuss the current legislative situation and what we should focus on for 2023. Not surprisingly, we concluded that it will be very difficult to pass desired voting rights and other legislation in the House of Representatives in the 118th Congress. We had success last year when the Electoral Count Reform Act was developed by a bipartisan group of moderate senators, so our best hope appears to be to see if that can be replicated in the House. We plan to do some intelligence gathering work with more moderate House offices to learn what might be feasible, and we are putting together an action alert that will encourage bipartisan legislation. We would love to see a reduction in the extreme polarization that pervades Congress.

We need to continue our work in advocating for voting rights, even if legislation will not be passed in this congressional session. We will be checking in with our partner organizations Declaration for American Democracy (DFAD) and Faithful Democracy to see what their agenda will be. There are a few bills that we plan to track, including

- DC Statehood
- A re-introduced version of FTV: JRL Voting Rights Act
- H.J.Res.13 - relating to the authority of Congress and the States to regulate contributions and expenditures intended to affect elections, and to enact public financing systems for political campaigns.
- The Transparent Representation Upholding Service and Trust in Congress Act, or TRUST Act, which would require members of Congress, their spouses and children to put certain investment assets into qualified blind trusts during their tenure in the federal legislature.
- The End Dark Money Act
- Two bills that will have an impact on social media, one to have social media sites pay newspapers for republishing their work - this had bipartisan support in the Senate; and a second to eliminate Title 230 and make social media more responsible and accountable.

We can clearly do more than watch and learn, and we plan to put effort into building relationships with other UU's, and increasing our UUSJ membership base. There is still a deep need for member advocacy and we can engage our members in this effort, pushing in the direction we want to go even if it takes a long time. We can reach out to others in our congregations and encourage them to participate in UUSJ events and actions. We can organize a number of democracy related educational events to draw people into the effort. We can also work with UU the Vote congregation leaders to help them maintain momentum into the 2024 elections.

We discussed the potential for working with various state groups, but have run into obstacles in the past, and we may try it a bit more, but not jump into it too quickly or seriously. However, it is

important to note that some states are moving ahead independently of the federal government, even working with foreign governments (Texas, Florida).

So, in summary, we plan to

- Maintain our advocacy of voting rights
- Investigate to see if any democracy legislation has a chance - identify House centrists and meet with them.
- Work to increase UUSJ membership. Reach out to other UU's and hold educational and other events to draw people in.