



Democracy Action Team Board Report, April. 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

Our Goals and Priorities for the 118th session of Congress are stated below, including related legislation that links to the priorities.

Strengthen Our Democracy:

- The UUSJ Democracy Action Team's overarching long term goal is to help save our democracy from the powerful forces that are attacking it.
- These forces are evident in the widespread efforts to deny voting rights, the violent attempt to overturn the results of a free and fair election, and in the efforts to make our national legislative bodies ineffective.
- In service of our primary goal we will focus on voting rights and related democracy legislation, efforts to make Congress more effective, and educating the public about what is happening.

What Guides Us:

- Everyone in this country, and all of our social justice priorities, are dependent on having a strong and well functioning democracy, a healthy inclusive democracy.
- Our work is grounded in our UU Principles, particularly the 5th principle: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; as well as UUSJ's mission, vision and organizational values.
- We seek and use guidance from our democracy partner organization members, our fellow UUSJ action team members, as well as those most impacted by voter suppression.

Supporting Priorities and Related Legislation:

- **Defend elections** by assuring that the counting of votes and certification of elections is free from manipulation or subversion, by protecting election workers from threats and harassment, and by strengthening election infrastructure against hacking and misuse.

Relevant Bills

- a. The Sustaining Our Democracy Act (S.4239 - Klobuchar) would provide mandatory federal funding to help state and local governments support election administration, including resources for training and recruiting nonpartisan poll workers and election officials and for increasing voting access in underserved communities.
 - b. The Freedom to Vote Act (S.2747 in 117th Cong., not yet introduced in 118th) would criminalize attempts to hinder other people from registering to vote or helping someone register to vote, and contains other election security provisions.
 - c. The Election Official Protection Act (S.4920 in 117th Cong., not yet reintroduced) supports both training and protection of election officials and volunteers.
- **Find opportunities to make it easier for all Americans to register and vote** by supporting automatic registration, early voting, mail-in voting and drop boxes, by expanding restoration of voting rights to felons and by opposing unnecessary and discriminatory voting restrictions.
 - a. The Freedom to Vote Act (S.2747 in 117th Cong., not yet introduced in 118th) would expand voter registration (e.g., automatic and same-day registration) and voting access (e.g., vote-by-mail and early voting) and would limit removing voters from voter rolls. Also restores voting rights to persons who have served felony sentences .
 - b. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act (S.4 in 117th Cong., not yet re-introduced in 118th), would reinstate DOJ pre-clearance of certain practices before implementation, such as changes to methods of election and redistricting.
 - c. The Restoring Faith in Elections Act, (H.R.156 - Fitzpatrick) would establish consistent standards and procedures for voter registration and voting in elections for Federal office; would require all States to provide automatic voter registration and provide consistent standards for automatic voter registration.
 - **Reduce the power of the wealthy and corporations** over our democracy by supporting limits on the raising and spending of money to influence elections, establishment of public campaign financing systems and stronger ethics rules for both Congress and the Supreme Court.
 - a. The DISCLOSE Act (S.512 - H.R.1118) would require organizations spending money in elections to disclose donors who have given \$10,000 or more during an election cycle and would require groups that spend money on ads supporting or opposing judicial nominees to disclose their donors.
 - b. H.J.Res 13 - This joint resolution proposes a constitutional amendment authorizing Congress and the states to (1) regulate and impose reasonable viewpoint-neutral limitations on the raising and spending of money by candidates and others to influence elections; and (2) regulate and enact public campaign financing systems, including those designed to restrict the influence of private wealth by offsetting the raising and spending of money by candidates and others with increased public funding.

- c. Legislation introduced by Senators Klobuchar and Fisher (no bill text available) would permanently extend the FEC's administrative fine program to help ensure campaign finance rules are being followed
 - d. The End Dark Money Act, H.R.142, would repeal the restriction on the use of funds by the IRS to issue regulations relating to the standard for determining whether certain nonprofit civic organizations are being operated exclusively for the promotion of social welfare.
 - e. The TRUST Act (H.R.345 - Spanberger) would require a Member of Congress to place specified investments into a qualified blind trust until 180 days after the end of their tenure.
- **Fight debilitating hyper-partisanship** by supporting bipartisan efforts to reduce voter misinformation, end manipulation of voting district boundaries that favor one party, and instituting reforms that reduce the power of extreme partisans such as ranked-choice voting.
 - a. The Freedom to Vote Act (S.2747 in 117th Cong) outlines criteria for congressional redistricting that prevent partisan gerrymandering. It also prohibits mid-decade redistricting.
 - b. HR. 157, the CLEAN Elections Act (Fitzpatrick) would require the use of independent nonpartisan commissions to carry out congressional redistricting and require States to hold open primaries for elections for Federal office.
 - **Educate the public about the threats to democracy and what they can do to support democracy** through mailings and action alerts, and by sponsoring events with respected noteworthy speakers.
 - a. The Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (S.673 - Klobuchar) sets out a process through which broadcast or digital news providers may collectively negotiate with social media companies regarding use of the news providers' content by the platforms.

Current Actions

We need to continue our work in advocating for voting rights, even if legislation may 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 priorities will be. Depending on their agenda, we may update our plans to support these partner organizations, as long as their activities are consistent with our goals and priorities.

In the last several weeks we have been meeting with House staffers to see if any democracy legislation has a chance of moving forward. To date we have met with three offices:

- Rep. James McGovern (D-MA), Ranking Member, House Committee on Rules, cosponsor of H.J. Res 13 and End Dark Money Act
- Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), Member of Jan. 6 Commission, sponsor of H.J. Res 13 and cosponsor of End Dark Money Act
- Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), Co-Chair of Problem Solvers Caucus and sponsor of the CLEAN Elections Act and the Restoring Faith in Elections Act

We had useful conversations with each of the offices about the current situation in the House. Staff still consider it very early in this session of Congress and, at least for now, the Freedom Caucus members are driving what is being discussed.

Our meeting with Rep McGovern's (D-MA) office highlighted the key role of the House Committee on Rules. Every piece of legislation goes through this committee, and rules are attached. The committee determines how a bill is considered on the floor and if it's considered on the floor. There are four Democrats and nine Republicans on this committee, two of which are Freedom Caucus members. This vote framework means the minority is not in a position to block legislation from moving forward if the majority votes together.

Rep. Schiff (D-CA) introduced H.J. Res 13, the Democracy for All Amendment, in January, and his office staff member was happy to see it on our list. It has over 100 co-sponsors, but unfortunately none are Republicans. She found this disappointing and stated that the flow of big money inhibits that. He helped pass the Freedom to Vote / John Lewis Act during the last session of Congress, and is excited to support it again when it is reintroduced. Also, he will be introducing the Protecting Our Democracy Act, an enormous package to try to thwart efforts to derail our democracy.

Rep. Fitzpatrick (R-PA) is concerned that people are losing faith in institutions and elections. He wants to return trust. It was a priority during his 14 years in the FBI with the last assignment working in Ukraine on elections. Since he has been in office (2017-present) he has introduced bills on the first day of each new session of Congress on Constitutional amendments and structural change such as nonpartisan commissions for redistricting, restoring faith in elections (mail voting, timely results, etc.), making it easy to vote and hard to cheat.

Looking Forward

Our thought and hope is that Rep. Fitzpatrick's proposed legislation might gain bipartisan support. The CLEAN Elections Act currently does have one cosponsoring Democrat and the Restoring Faith in Elections Act does not yet have any cosponsors. We may be able to convince some offices to cosponsor either or both of these bills, which could be a very worthy goal. Bipartisan members of Congress do talk with each other. We could create an action alert to raise awareness of the two bills, as well as continue to visit more offices. We will discuss this at our upcoming team meeting.

We also 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 will reach out to others in our congregations and encourage them to participate in UUSJ events and actions. We plan to organize a number of democracy related educational events to draw people into the effort. We will also work with UU the Vote congregation leaders to help them gain momentum into the 2024 elections.