



Democracy Action Team Annual Board Report, June. 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.

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:

- **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.

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

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, 2022, 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.

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 Declaration For American Democracy.
- Developed a successful WHWN / Action Alert on ECA: 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 recruited a new person for our DAT team who participated in the calls.

2023 Accomplishments

Over the period from January through April, 2023 we had numerous meetings with members of the Immigration Action Team, Pablo, Rev. Peggy Clarke and Starling Carter to create a UUSJ education and promotion video that is being used at this year's UUA General Assembly.

In March and April we met with House staffers to see what democracy legislation, if any, has a chance of moving forward. We 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. Schiff 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.

In addition to the meetings we organized, we also participated in two meetings that were organized by Faithful Democracy.

- Representative John Sarbanes (D-MD), H.R. 1 - For the People Act sponsor in the 117th Congress
- Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), member of Senate Judiciary Committee

We heard from Katie Teleky, Rep. John Sarbanes Legislative Director, that she does not anticipate any of the democracy issues will move forward during this session of Congress. They will continue to look for opportunities when the moment is right, and then take appropriate action. They will uplift what is happening in the states, both good and bad, and expect bad legislation to come out from the Republicans.

They are planning to re-introduce the Freedom to Vote Act - tweaking a few things here and there - in close contact with the various aligned committees. The new version will have a chance to work on ethics issues that disappeared when H.R. 1 was reformatted into the Freedom to Vote Act. H.R. 1 had 3 pillars - voting rights / campaign finance / ethics. The ethics pillar was dropped out on the Senate side. The new bill will be reintroduced in the complete form.

The John R. Lewis bill is on a separate track. It will be reintroduced this year, but will take some time. Supreme Court cases may require edits to this bill.

We heard from Clair Kim of Sen. Whitehouse's office that foreign donations are opposed by both parties, and the DISCLOSE Act addresses this. However, it has yet to get a Republican supporter. She would love for Faithful Democracy groups to meet with Republican senators and ask them to support this act.

On May 19, the UUSJ Democracy Action Team co-sponsored an event that was part of the First Parish in Concord Democracy Festival. It was a panel discussion on the topic of **Democracy: Its Value and for Whom?** The panelists were excellent.

1. **Danielle Allen**, Harvard professor and founder of Partners in Democracy
2. **Irena Koval**, Ukrainian playwright, novelist and essayist
3. **Shanique Spaulding**, Executive Director, MA Voter Table
4. **Jim Tull**, expert in international conflict management

Here is the link to the video:

<https://youtu.be/pYWdib-p3Fw>

For more information about the Democracy Festival, please contact Fred Van Deusen at fredvandeu@gmail.com.

Looking Forward

We need to continue our work in advocating for voting rights, even if legislation may not be passed in this congressional session. We have been checking in with our partner organizations Declaration for American Democracy (DFAD) and Faithful Democracy to see what their priorities are, but currently none of us have any democracy legislation to focus on that we believe will move forward in this Congress..Democracy has become a political issue, and the Republican Party controls what is happening in the House. The democracy issues are clearly understood and have been addressed in many bills that have lots of Democrat cosponsors, but no Republican cosponsors. We are told that Republicans run away from these bills.

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 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.