

# **OUR DEMOCRACY UNCORRUPTED**

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**Approved by an overwhelming majority of the delegate representatives to the June 2019 Plenary Sessions in Spokane, Washington, of the Unitarian Universalist Association – Spokane, Washington.**

## **2019 Statement of Conscience**

*America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary.*

*-Ta-Nehisi Coates*

Democracy in the United States has always been compromised. At the Nation's very founding, participation in governance was almost entirely limited to white male landowners. Wealth was created from those excluded: land seized from indigenous peoples who were forcibly assimilated or removed and/or exterminated; and labor exploited from enslaved Africans, indentured servants, immigrants, prisoners, the working poor, and women and children. Compounding this corruption is the existential threat of a global climate crisis that our current federal government is failing to address. The impact of this crisis will fall most heavily on low-income communities of color. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., echoing Unitarian minister Rev. Theodore Parker, said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We can no longer wait for that to happen. We must act to bend that arc now or face the unthinkable consequences of a destroyed environment and unlivable planet. If we are to rise to the moral challenge inherent in the climate crisis, we must embrace the struggle to achieve an uncorrupted democracy.

As people of faith committed to "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," we must continuously strive toward uncorrupted democracy. As a means to an end, democracy organizes decision-making among diverse people and preserves stability while balancing competing interests. But democracy is not merely a means. It is an end in itself, an ethical ideal, a moral and spiritual way of relating to one another. Sadly, many of our democratic institutions have been corrupted into being merely a means for giving powerful interests the appearance of legitimacy.

The promise of democracy is for a life that fashions us as the people we want to be. Terry Tempest Williams calls us to be resolute and courageous in our trust: "Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough

resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?”

Government by and for the people formally entails majority rule, with the majority's power limited by protection of the rights of those in the minority. Democratic government should include:

- universal voting rights that lead to and encourage higher voter participation rates;
- free, fair, competitive, and regular elections;
- beyond voting, accessible and meaningful channels of political participation open to all such as town meetings;
- access to accurate information and diverse media;
- policies and processes accountable to the voters, not to special interests;
- basic individual liberties that include freedom both of and from religion, freedom of press and speech, and the right to engage in humanitarian aid, boycotts and divestment;
- leaders who reflect the racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, and class diversity of the population and who truly represent the people;
- an independent judiciary and adherence to the rule of law;
- policies implemented by those duly authorized;
- freedom from influence of foreign or external powers; and
- **freedom from the undue influence of corporations and money.**

Democracy is not only a series of rules and systems, it is the culture and commitments of the people and of those entrusted with carrying out the will of the people. A truly democratic culture requires:

- transparency and radical inclusivity (intentional deep listening, attending to the concerns of the most vulnerable, and caring about inclusion and exclusion);
- cooperation, multi-partisanship, and decision-making through consensus-building;
- accountability and accessibility, being responsive to the public good versus special interests;
- public officials being held to a high standard of ethical and fiduciary responsibility; and

- respecting and defending the rights and needs of those in the minority.

The Nation's founding documents expressed inspiring ideals of democratic equality. Unequal valuation, however, has undermined our country's prospects for living the promise of true democracy: white people are valued more than people of color, men more than women, the rich more than the poor, cisgender and heterosexuals over LGBTQ+. These valuations, enshrined in law and custom, amplify the power of the advantaged and the advantages of the powerful, and continue to undercut our expressed ideals.

The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments of 1865-1870, the 17th Amendment of 1913, the 19th Amendment of 1920, and civil rights legislation in the 1960s expanded voting rights. Yet, our laws and systems continue to protect privilege and maintain value gaps. White supremacist values and practices permeate the United States' 400-year history. They continue today through policies that disproportionately lower voter participation and reduce representation among peoples of color, people with low income, young adults, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged people. Such policies include denial of voting rights for people convicted of felonies, voter ID requirements, and restrictions on early voting opportunities. In addition, gerrymandering in certain states has limited the electoral power of people of color and of less powerful political parties. It can also move legislators further to the extremes, reducing their desire to cooperate or compromise.

The outsized influence of wealthy individuals and corporations on elections, always a corruption of democracy, has worsened in recent decades. The costs of campaigning in the United States have skyrocketed, increasing legislators' debt to large donors. This outsized impact of wealth among other factors has created a narrow two party system, excluding vibrant progressive, socialist, and labor movements. Additionally, Supreme Court decisions struck down attempts to limit the influence of money in politics: Buckley v. Valeo (1976) ruled that spending is a protected form of speech, and Citizens United (2010) ruled that because corporations are people, their campaign spending is protected free speech and may not be restricted. Fixing our democracy requires examining how structural racism, sexism, money, environmental exploitation, militarization, and other systemic forms of oppression contribute to accumulation of wealth and consolidation of political power.

At the Association level, Unitarian Universalists also fall short of democratic ideals. The cost and time required to participate in our annual General Assembly exclude many from association-level decision-making. Our business procedures sometimes limit important conversations. The formal procedures often feel cumbersome; they are rooted in parliamentary rules that reflect a competitive orientation. Informal procedures have not addressed the problem. Excluding people of color from the creation of processes has distanced them from engagement. Informal systems rely on organizational cultures that not everyone has knowledge of or is able to access.

Congregations vary in governance and decision-making processes. Our organizational styles vary from leader-oriented with defined hierarchies to more collaborative

leadership with changing roles. At both the Associational and congregational levels, realizing true democracy requires expanding to include more diverse voices.

### **Theological/Religious Grounding**

*"We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote . . . the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."*

Two phrases here warrant attention: *Within our congregations*. The 1648 Cambridge Platform laid the foundation for Unitarian Universalist polity, establishing the autonomy of congregations. Congregational polity puts democratic practice at the center of governance. Our shared religious life depends on honoring every member's voice and vote.

*Society at large*. Our religious commitments extend beyond our congregations' walls. Excluding our neighbors' voices impoverishes our souls; hearing all voices expands our spirits. Our faith calls us to live into the requirements of real democracy.

Our theology locates healing and wholeness in relationship, in contrast to a theology of sin that sees human nature as fundamentally corrupt. Our tradition locates hope for addressing social problems not in the suppression of basic sinfulness but in being open to diverse perspectives and building connections. Another source of our religious movement is the Protestant Reformation's response to the corruption of a church that sold the promise of heaven for a price. Today we face the parallel corruption in which power, rather than heaven, is sold to those who meet the price.

### **Actions We Could Take**

Achieving the ideals of our faith related to democracy requires new approaches for mobilizing power and influence. This means engaging in radical truth-telling, intersectional organizing, and naming the forces that resist democratic reforms. A truly inclusive democracy challenges the exploitation of peoples and natural resources by corporate and political power. Our collective future calls us to participate in what Unitarian theologian Rev. James Luther Adams named "the prophethood of all believers."

Individuals can take actions such as the following:

- Conduct a personal democracy audit. Review relationships with systems that perpetuate consolidation of wealth and power, i.e. investment choices.
- Seek out varied and reliable sources of information.
- Work with community leaders to do participatory budgeting in all levels of local and state government.
- Work with community leaders or organizations or assemblies to craft electoral platforms and run supportive candidates.

- Support electoral justice campaigns led by community organizers of color with voter registration, particularly among underrepresented populations.
- Contribute time, talent, and money to democracy-building efforts and to non-profit civic organizations that represent economically oppressed or marginalized people.
- Direct action toward democratic reforms and integrity through rallies, community organized events, advocacy and contacts with elected officials. Specific goals include:
  - public financing of campaigns including independent and third-party candidates, elimination of corporate donation, and establishment of a small donor matching system;
  - expanding ballot access, i.e. early voting, access to polling places, same day voter registration, permanent mail ballot list, and automatic voter registration;
  - eliminating the electoral college;
  - ensuring voting integrity with paper ballot backups;
  - eliminating gerrymandering, partisan redistricting, and other forms of voter suppression;
  - allowing people with felony convictions to vote;
  - implementing ranked choice and/or proportional voting;
  - reinstating the 1965 Voting Rights Act provisions, and strengthening the Federal Elections Commission; and
  - amending the Constitution to overturn corporate constitutional rights and money as speech.

Congregations/covenanted communities can take actions such as the following:

- Conduct a congregational democracy audit that includes any practices that continue to sustain white privilege and income inequality. Take action to address findings.
- Organize action groups based on the needs of democratic reform and investigate how structural racism, sexism, classism, environmental degradation, and militarization have driven the accumulation of wealth and political power.
- Partner with other UU congregations and with other faith communities, non-profits, and unions to work on democratic reforms.
- Support the Declaration for American Democracy campaign for comprehensive federal and state democracy reform.

- Organize advocacy initiatives such as postcards, social media campaigns, rallies, sit-ins, petition drives, and other forms of direct action in support of democratic reforms.
- Sponsor educational forums about factors contributing to the corruption of democracy.
- As part of the offering or special collections, ask for funds to support democracy-strengthening efforts.
- Adopt resolutions supporting democratic reforms including overturning constitutional rights and money as speech.
- Collaborate with ongoing UU-related partnerships such as UUSJ's "Write Here! Write Now!" campaign for democracy reform.
- Include children and youth of the congregation in conversations and invite them to join actions.

Clusters, districts, or state legislative ministries can take actions such as the following:

- Advocate for state level democracy reform legislation, voter rights, access, and participation as advocacy priorities.
- Create and publish report cards on state or local legislators' records on campaign financing and issues impacting voter rights, access, and participation.
- Host non-partisan forums that alert congregations and the public to issues related to democratic processes, and information about issues and candidates.
- Connect congregations that are advocating for democratic reform at the state, local or national level.
- Use a variety of advocacy tools including media communications, social media, and meetings with legislators to advocate for issues such as voting rights for people with felony convictions, campaign finance reform, and election security.
- Study gerrymandering issues within the state and advise advocates about recommended actions to ensure fair representation.
- Monitor and work to prevent privatization efforts and insist on accountability from existing contractors that provide services, such as, private prisons, schools, and "welfare to work" programs.
- Support efforts to end the Electoral College and in the interim urge states to allocate their electoral votes to the Presidential candidate who won the popular vote.

The UUA can take actions such as the following:

- Conduct periodic association-wide democracy audits that include any practices that continue to sustain any structures of oppression and disenfranchisement including white supremacy, ableism, sexism, and classism. Take action to address the findings.
- Provide for member congregations resources that promote effective democratic engagement.
- Actively explore opportunities for virtually engaging more Unitarian Universalists in the Association's governance.
- Continue refining the Association's collective democratic decision-making processes with tools such as ranked and proportional voting.
- Encourage leaders of the UUA and other faiths to join the Interfaith Caucus of Move to Amend <https://movetoamend.org/interfaith-caucus>.
- Invest in state legislative ministries and advocacy at the national level.
- Participate in the democracy-supporting movements such as WeDemandDemocracy.org
- Participate in interfaith and multiracial coalitions and other social justice groups that work toward achieving democratic reforms.
- Follow the lead of communities of color advocacy and political action groups including the cultivation of candidates for elected office.
- Advocate for democratic reforms, including the limiting of money in politics and amending the constitution to eliminate corporate constitutional rights and money as speech.
- Advocate for the elimination of the Electoral College.
- Advocate for the protection of constitutional rights including the right to engage in humanitarian aid, to boycott and to divest.

Rev. Barbara Pescan expressed both our debt and our ongoing responsibility to preceding generations: "Because of those who came before, we are; in spite of their failings, we believe; because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision, we, too, dream." The Nation's founders pointed in the direction of a horizon they themselves could not see. It falls now to us to make real the dream of democracy uncorrupted, a government truly of the people, by the people, and for the people.

For more information contact [socialjustice@uua.org](mailto:socialjustice@uua.org).

### **Link to UUA Page with final copy:**

<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/our-democracy-uncorrupted>

**Link to this version – Amendment recommendations highlighted**

<https://movetoamend.org/toolkit/unitarian-universalist-statement-conscience-our-democracy-uncorrupted>

**Extract from Unitarian Universalist Association ByLaws and Rules dated July 1, 2018 and corrected on May 8, 2019:**

2283 The UUA Administration shall report at each regular General  
2284 Assembly regarding implementation of UUA Statements of  
2285 Conscience with particular reference to the most recently adopted  
2286 Statement of Conscience. Such report shall summarize  
2287 implementation by member congregations, UUA staff and other  
2288 Unitarian Universalist groups