



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“The People vs. Democracy”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

4 November 2018

frederickuu.org

The Sunday before Election Day is a time to reflect on how our values can inform our engagement with the democratic process. As Unitarian Universalists, one of our slogans is “Side with love.” So what might it mean to “**vote on the side of love**”? One among many possible responses to that question is to turn our UU principles into a set of questions to ask candidates for public office:

1. How do your policy proposals reflect the inherent worth and dignity of every person?
2. If elected, how will your decisions demonstrate your commitment to justice, equity and compassion in human relations?
3. How will you encourage acceptance across party lines?
4. What insights from your own search for truth and meaning guide you as a political leader?
5. What are your ideas for improving our democratic process?
6. Within our international community, how will you work effectively towards the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all?
7. Acknowledging our global interdependence, how will your decisions impact our planet and future generations?
8. What specific actions will you take to accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions—and build a diverse, multicultural society?

There is no single right answer to these questions—for all situations, times and places. And there is room within the “big tent” of Unitarian Universalism for people supporting candidates along different points of the political spectrum who are generally in line with these values.

In that light, if I had to summarize how UU congregational leaders can best navigate the “separation of church and state,” it would be to say that we can be **political, but not partisan in our official stances**. We can advocate for and against particular political issues and positions according to our UU values, but we can’t endorse specific candidates. That doesn’t, however, preclude us from speaking prophetically, in order to hold politicians accountable for specific action they have or haven’t taken.

So on this Sunday before Election Day, I would like to invite us to reflect on the political landscape through the lens of our **UU 5th Principle**: “**The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.**” From a 5th Principle perspective, we lose our way as UUs if we devolve into a rigid, reflexive partisanship. But we act in alignment with some of our highest values when we act individually and collectively to defend the democratic process itself. So, beyond the horserace of whether any given candidate wins, I am interested in better equipping us to identify when democratic norms in our society are being undermined—and the ways we can protect our democracy both for ourselves and for future generations.

If there were more time, we could also consider the rising tide of Authoritarianism globally—but arguably the most important first step we can take is getting our own house in order. The democracy we have the most direct influence over is the one in which ourselves, our friends, and neighbors can vote. And although there are examples of previous U.S. government officials undermining democratic norms, the reason I scheduled this topic for today is that it is important to be honest, clear, and direct about **the unprecedented level at which our current president has regularly, openly, and unapologetically shown “disdain for basic constitutional norms”** (Mounk 2). There is not time for an exhaustive list, but here is a distillation:

- Over the course of his campaign, candidate Trump broke just about every basic rule of democratic politics. He promised to jail his political opponents. He refused to say that he would accept the outcome of the election. He bullied the press.... He invited a foreign power to sabotage his main competitor. He incited hatred against ethnic and religious minorities and promised to take unconstitutional action against them....
- As President-elect, he made baseless claims about widespread voter fraud. He denigrated the neutrality of independent state institutions from courts to the intelligence agencies. He inquired about the status of planning permits for his building projects on official calls with foreign heads of state. He refused to create a blind trust for his private businesses. And he repeatedly complimented the dictatorial leader of a rival power.
- As president, he has refused to resolve his substantial conflicts of interest. He has used the machinery of government to spread outright lies. He has tried to bar permanent residents from reentering the country. He has railed against “so-called judges.” He has dubbed journalists “enemies of the American people.” He has threatened the owners of critical media outlets with higher taxes. He has undermined attempts to investigate his links with Russia by colluding with loyalist legislators, firing the Director of the FBI, and publicly threatening him with secret recordings.

Note that this list is not about the success or failure of partisan political positions. **It is about the person occupying the office of the President of the United States having a “reckless disregard” for our democratic traditions and Constitutional norms** (119).

To name yet another example from just this past week, when our president wanted to manipulate the media and the public in the days before the midterm election, he threatened to “Void Birthright Citizenship Law By Executive Order,” which would violate the 14th Amendment. As best as I can tell, his motivation is not whether

something is Constitutional, but whether ‘the ends justify the means.’ And **the painful truth is that such cynical ploys have often proven to be effective.**

One of the guides that I have found most helpful in thinking through what are merely partisan differences and what differences are a threat to our democratic norms is **Yascha Mounk**. Mounk was born in 1982 in Germany to parents who immigrated from Poland. His mother is Jewish. He earned a B.A. in History from Cambridge, a Ph.D. in Government from Harvard, and became a U.S. citizen just last year. So he has fascinating perspective on the world for such a time as this. I first learned about him on his regular podcast for Slate, “The Good Fight” — and this sermon is inspired by his most recent book titled The People vs. Democracy (Harvard University Press, 2018).

Part of what he means with his title—The People vs. Democracy— is that “the people” can ironically pervert democracy *by democratic means*. Democracy (from the Greek *δημοκρατία/dēmokratía*) literally means that the “people” (*demos*) have the “power” (*-kratía*)—but **what if the people democratically vote to cede power to a dictator?** For us Unitarian Universalists, one can make the argument that our 5th Principle commitment to democracy means that there should be guardrails to prevent any such choice. From this perspective, any act that would permanently undermine a democratic check on power would be itself anti-democratic—and as such “out of order.”

That being said, the truth is that democracy is definitionally nothing more than “a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translate popular views into public policy.” One might add that, “We the People of the United States” have **values beyond a commitment to democracy. These additional values “protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights** such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of association to all citizens (including ethnic and religious minorities)” (27).

But these values are not democratic values; they are **liberal values**—not liberal like the modern Democratic Party, but classical, 18th-century, Enlightenment Liberalism on which our nation was founded. That classical Liberalism is from the Latin root *liber*, meaning freedom. It is about protecting essential freedoms for all individuals irrespective of how the people vote in a given election.

Said more directly, sometimes people vote democratically for *illiberal* values that violate individual rights and liberties. The good news is that “We the people of the United States” have come together to form a more perfect union that is not merely a democracy. We are a *liberal* democracy. **Our founders created “a political system that is both liberal *and* democratic—one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy.”** In this sense, “George W. Bush is as much a liberal as Barack Obama, and Ronald Regan was as much a liberal as Bill Clinton.” But when any president—irrespective of political party—violates basic liberal values, our democracy is threatened (26-27).

Mouk calls the two common alternatives to liberal democracy “democracy without rights” and “rights without democracy.” **“Democracy *without rights*” is the “Tyranny of the Majority” that our our nation’s founders feared.** They thought that core individual freedoms like speech, religion, press, and association must be protected irrespective of what any temporary majority of the voters wanted in the heat of any given electoral moment. “Rights *without democracy*” is when our human rights and civil rights are maintained, but factors such as big money and voter suppression dominate the political process to the extent that the will of the people is undermined.

We currently have both problems in the U.S. today. I will address the issue of “Rights without democracy” more fully in late January in a sermon on “We the Corporations?!” For now, I want to keep our focus on a possible future of “Democracy without rights”—that could itself, in turn, devolve into a *dictatorship* with neither democracy nor rights.

And one common path to “democracy without rights”—into manipulating the people into empowering politicians who would undermine individual rights and democratic norms—is populism. I will hasten to add that, of course, not all populism is bad. Indeed, populism that emphasizes the importance of the people against the concerns of the elite few can be quite healthy for the body politic.

So it would be more accurate to say that **the most common path to “democracy without rights” is a particular form of populism known as *demagoguery*.** Both demagoguery and democracy begin with the same Greek root of *demos* (meaning “people”). But a demagogue adds in the Greek word *ἀγωγός*

(meaning “leader”). Demagoguery has the sense not of democratic people-power, but of a leader who turns “we the people” into a mob.

We have seen this approach with Donald Trump here in the U.S., with Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom’s vote to #Brexit (to exit from the European Union), with Marine Le Pen in France, with Fraunke Petry in Germany, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and others around the world. Despite important differences, there is a pattern in the rhetoric of these politicians that, “the solutions to the most pressing problems of our time are much more straightforward than the political establishment would have us believe.... And if the pure voice of the people could prevail, the reason for popular discontent would quickly vanish. America (or Great Britain, or Germany, or France) would be great again” (7).

The truth is that politics—and life—are much messier and more complicated than that. So to gain and maintain power, demagogues tend to blame racial, ethnic, and religious minorities—as well as any political institutions which inhibit the demagogue’s power. Together, that results in a shift toward democracy without rights—whipping up the passions of an electoral majority to take away the rights of the few. It is often too late when the majority realizes that their individual rights and liberties tend to eventually be targeted as well.

This pattern is famously embodied in Martin Niemöller quote that, “First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. **Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.**”

History shows us time and again that when rights, liberties, and civilities are disrespected, previously unquestioned norms quickly deteriorate. **President Trump has repeated crossed what many people considered “red lines. But as soon as we looked back at them through the rearview mirror, they started to appear...yellow or green”** (258).

Nevertheless, I do not think the takeaway is to despair. If the year 2016, the election of Donald Trump, and the passage of Brexit taught us anything, it is that the future is uncertain and the experts don’t always make accurate predictions (260). There

remain many reasons to hope, mobilize, and organize to make our society less susceptible to demagoguery. Among the many tasks at hand is to *decrease* wealth inequality (16), *increase* funding for universal access to high quality education (157-158), and reform our Internet and social media platforms to be more responsible against misinformation and propaganda (17).

At its core, **the issue is not partisanship, but *patriotism*: defending the norms, rights, and freedoms that are the heart of our liberal democracy.** Speaking for myself, I rarely agreed with the political policies of Senator John McCain, but we heard so many moving testimonies at his funeral of the many times that he did courageously put country before party (116).

As I move toward my conclusion, I will give you one more example—this time from UU history—of defending our democracy as much or more as *patriots* than as partisans. History reminds me as well that as challenging as our current political climate is, it is not as terrible a time in our nation’s history as the Civil War. And I am reminded further that in 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, our Unitarian forebear Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809-1894) published an unofficial fifth verse to our national anthem that particularly wrestles with threats to our liberal democracy that come not from an external foe but from within.

When our land is illum'd with Liberty's smile,
If a foe from within strike a blow at her glory,
Down, down, with the traitor that dares to defile
The flag of her stars and the page of her story!
By the millions unchain'd who our birthright have gained
We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained!
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
While the land of the free is the home of the brave.

We live in challenging times. But even as demagogues seek to dominate and manipulate us with the politics of division, hatred, and cruelty, our invitation is to continue to side with love—to live evermore fully into the original promise of our nation: to **build a world in which *all people* are created equal ”with certain unalienable Rights, that**

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In the words of African-American poet and activist Langston Hughes (1901-1967):

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!