

**Voting: The Most Powerful Non-Violent Tool We Have**  
**October 4, 2020**  
**Rev. Dr. Judith Wright**

Our Unitarian Universalist seven principles, which we as Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote across all of our more than one thousand congregations in the US, include our fifth principle,

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, within our congregations and in society at large.

Our seven UU principles also includes our second principle, that of justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

It is primarily within the framework of these two principles that I want to explore with you this morning voting as a necessary tool for a healthy democracy.

The late Congressman John Lewis stated:

My dear friends: Your vote is precious, almost sacred.

It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union.<sup>1</sup>

Raised on a family farm as a child, one of ten children, in his late teenage years in Alabama, John Lewis would come to read about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's teaching of non-violent protests, and come to believe deeply in non-violence and loving those who hate you.

He walked fearlessly into crowds that spewed hatred towards people of color, again and again. He was Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee from 1963-1966. He and others at that time risked their lives for racial justice.

Severely beaten at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, John, after receiving hospital care, that very day, went right out again to continue to protest.

Reflecting on this time in his life, John told himself as well as others to

“Never give up, never give in, never become bitter or hostile.”<sup>2</sup>

John wanted for all people in our democracy the right to vote, the right for people to choose their elected leaders.

Recently, before his death on July 17<sup>th</sup> of this year, he stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, where he had almost died in the 1960s, seeking justice and the right to vote.

John told the overflowing crowd:

*“Selma is a place where we injected something very meaningful into our democracy. We opened the political process and made it possible for hundreds and thousands and millions of people to come in and be participants.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis. Quote from 20102 speech in Charlotte, North Carolina. <https://blackalliance.org/john-lewis-quotes/#:~:text=%20Best%20John%20Lewis%20Quotes%3A%20Voting%2C%20Love%2C%20Education%2C,anyone...%204%20Quotes%20on%20Love.%20%20More%20>

<sup>2</sup> [www.women.com/michellenati/lists/john-lewis-quotes-010620](http://www.women.com/michellenati/lists/john-lewis-quotes-010620)

<sup>3</sup> John Lewis. Quote about Selma. <https://blackalliance.org/john-lewis-quotes/>

The truth is, such voting rights have been very hard to win, not only for people of color, but for many Americans, starting with the founding of our nation.

In the early years of our nation's formation free white men were eligible to vote.

However, the conditions of their right to vote was left to the states to decide.

For example, did the man need to own property to be eligible to vote?

At that time, as many as three out of four Englishmen and women who had sailed to the colonies were either debtors or convicts or indentured servants.

They were not slaves, but they were not truly free.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the ratification of the Constitution in late June of 1788, states limited the right to vote to those who owned property or paid taxes. This was about six percent of the population.

That's right. I said six percent.

In 1771 as her husband participated in the First Continental Congress, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, encouraging him to remember to include women in the right to participate in the new government being formed.

*"Remember the ladies"* she said.

*"Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands."*<sup>5</sup>

Just imagine with me, for a moment, what it would have been like if women were treated as equals with men at the time of the formation of our democracy.

But, of course, women were not, and suffered greatly for discrimination against them because of their sex. Women did not gain the right to vote until 1920.

For white men, the requirement of owning property shifted by the mid 1800's, when in the 1828 presidential election most states let white men vote.

The last state to abolish property requirements was South Carolina in 1856.

Tax paying requirements remained even into the twentieth century, in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, and across states, poor white men continued to be disenfranchised.

The passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished the three fifths clause in the Constitution as obsolete, and each person – man, woman, and child counted no longer as three fifths, but as five fifths. Slavery was abolished.

While during the Civil War years, both Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as a national organized group of women worked both for abolition and black civil rights, the passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment betrayed all their efforts.<sup>6</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment sought to define who was a citizen and who could, then vote.

The effort by the women was to assure equal rights for all citizens, not just freed men.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued against using the word "male" to define a citizen,

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<sup>4</sup> Jill Lepore. *These Truths*. W.W. Norton, Co. 2018. P. 56

<sup>5</sup> Jill Lepore, pp. 96-97.

<sup>6</sup> Jill Lepore, p. 321

saying at the time, “it will take us at least a century to get it out.”<sup>7</sup>”

Here is just a taste of the argument at that time --of how women protested and the answers they were given:

*“Can anyone tell us why the great advocates of Human Equality....  
forget that when they were a weak party  
and needed all the womanly strength  
of the nation to help them, they always united the words  
“without regard to sex, race or color?”  
asked Ohio-born reformer Francis Gage.*

Charles Sumner responded:

*“We know how the Negro will vote, but we are not so sure of the women.”<sup>8</sup>”*

Jill Lepore, American historian writes in her book *These Truths*:

*“How women would vote was impossible to know.  
Would black women vote the way black men voted?  
Would white women vote like black women?”<sup>9</sup>”*

Lepore adds that the Republicans who were in charge at the time decided not to find out.

“This is the negro’s hour” Congressmen told the women at the time of writing the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

“May I ask you just one question based on the apparent opposition in which you place the negro and the woman?” Stanton asked Wendell Phillips.

“My question is this: Do you believe the African race is entirely composed of males?”<sup>10</sup>”

The word “males” while in the first draft, was changed to “persons” in the final draft. In the House of Representatives, then there was this exchange of words on the meaning of “persons.”

Mr. Johnson: “Females as well as males?”

Mr. Howard: “Mr. Madison does not say anything about females.”

Mr. Johnson: “Persons.”

Mr. Howard: I believe Mr. Madison was old enough and wise enough to take it for granted that there was such a thing as the law of nature and by that law, women and children are not regarded as equal to men.<sup>11</sup>”

It would take a century for this debate to come back to Congress again, and that was during the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This law would outlaw discrimination based on race, religion, sex or national origin,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lepore, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> Lepore, p. 322.

And, as we know, brought federal help to give African Americans the support needed to end segregation in our nation.

And, of course, there was the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which Congressman John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr, and many UUs worked so hard to achieve.

This Act strove to achieve assurance of the right to vote for all minorities.

Since the passage of this Act, Black registration for voting gradually increased over forty-seven years to where there were 73% Black registered voters in 2012.

This was an historic moment, when there was a point of equality in voting registration between Black and white voters.

But this ratio of equality has dropped again.

According to the US. Census, while 71% of whites have registered, 64% of Blacks are registered, and Hispanics and other people of color are below 55% today.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965's power was lessened in 2013 by the Supreme Court decision in the *Shelby County vs. Holder* case which ruled that preclearance, or oversight by the federal authorities was no longer necessary for states wanting to change their voting laws.

Additionally, the language requirement, of making the ballot comprehensible for people who do not speak English well was also struck down.

As an outcome of these changes to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, 11 Southern states have adopted more restrictive new voter laws, including Voter ID laws, closure of polling places, gerrymandering districts, and voter purges—all of which have disproportionately affected people of color.

Congressman John Lewis, before his death spoke out against these changes to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Following his death both members of the House and the Senate have proposed a new law, entitled the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

Currently, this proposed law has been assigned to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Why have I looked at our nation's history on voting through such an historical lens this morning?

One reason is that I believe that to change the future, we need to be aware of our history as a democracy.

Another reason is for us to deeply value all the past struggles and sacrifices made so that we can go and vote today.

And thirdly, given our nation's history on voting rights, I sense that today our right to vote, no matter what the color of our skin, no matter what our gender or sexual orientation, is threatened, and we need to step up and claim the right to vote for all American citizens. We all have heard of the threats to our postal system and its challenge to deliver Absentee Ballots.

We know of the efforts to discredit absentee ballot voting as a potential for voter fraud.

This is in spite of the fact that past efforts to discredit Absentee ballots have been shown to be baseless.

We know, of course, there are risks involved in having people vote by Absentee Ballots – will they fill out the form properly?

There are efforts being made to help people, because of COVID-19 fill out their ballots correctly by different organizations, including the NH Association of Retired Persons.<sup>12</sup>

There is so much at stake in the upcoming election. In 2016 one million eligible voters did not vote!

I want to suggest that we, as individuals and as a congregation make a pledge to vote! And if we can, make a further pledge to help register or get five more people to vote.

To value what has been so hard to achieve and maintain – the right to vote!

No one who is a citizen of our country should be intimidated or prevented from voting.

We need to work to assure that every citizen that wants to, can vote.

I'm going to give Congressman John Lewis, whom I have come to greatly admire, the final word in this sermon:

*Freedom is not a state; it is an act.*

*It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest.*

*Freedom is the continuous action we all must take,*

*and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.”<sup>13</sup>*

Peace and love to you.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://states.aarp.org/new-hampshire/election-voting-guide>

<sup>13</sup> John Lewis. A Memoir. Across That Bridge.