

Between Elections

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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One of the first courses I took in my ministerial formation happened to include a class on the same day as an election date. And while my schedule was certainly busy with part-time work and studies, it was also flexible enough that day, so that I managed to drop by the voting place on my way to class (it helped that the place was literally on my way to the school). This was fortunate, as the class that evening would have gone for about three hours and would have ended just as the polls were closing.

When I got to the class, I saw that the professor had arranged a lighter program than usual – it was mostly a question-and-answer period relating to some of our readings or upcoming assignments. About a half-hour-to-an-hour in, he asked if there were any more questions, and when no one else raised their hand, he told us that, instead of the regular mid-class break, the class was dismissed, as there was nothing else that couldn't wait until after the election, and he wanted to ensure that those two extra hours were available for folks to vote.

I respected the principle of the professor's decision, though I admit I was somewhat let down that I'd gone to the class for such a short session, being that *I* had already voted and didn't really get much benefit from the special dispensation he had given to the class. I also wondered how many of my fellow students would *actually* take advantage of this newfound opportunity.

One of my classmates shared part of the bus route home with me. I asked her if she had any plans for the newly-found free time. It so

happened that she'd been at school all day, and her home was too far to make a trip to her polling place in between classes. "I think I might actually get back in time to vote!" she said.

And *there* was one answer to what I'd been wondering on my way out of the class that had been dismissed early. And I realized that, just because things had already worked out nicely for me, other folks really *could* benefit from proactive action to ensure there'd be space for them to vote.

Even with some reduced class time, that professor taught me something. And last week, I took that lesson to heart, by moving my Café Drop-in's time one hour later, so that its timing wouldn't conflict with the polling hours and no one would be in a position where they'd have to choose between one or the other.

I really don't know if anyone ended up needing that time, or if they took advantage of it. But what I've learned, is that sometimes, it is important to cultivate the practice of consideration for others' needs, even if it isn't always obvious when someone has benefitted from it.

Over the past few elections there have been a number of options added to the electoral system to enhance the possibility that people who are eligible to vote, and wish to do so, can do so. This includes expanding the number of advance polling dates, making voting by mail an option for everyone, and allowing for same-day registration to the voters' list (I myself benefitted from this later option on at least one occasion).

These are good practices to observe and support... and plenty of options remain to be explored. Some are as simple as making voter ID procedures clearer and simpler to understand, as well as making sure most people who would ordinarily be able to vote can access those ID requirements with minimal hassle – particularly marginalized folks.

Another method that has been proposed – and in some countries, implemented – is making election days statutory holidays, to minimize the possibility that folks might need to choose between the right to vote and the competing demands of work, family, sustenance, and health.

This past week, for instance, even though there were a whole 12 hours allotted for the polls, someone who works regular business hours, commutes from work, and makes time for a wholesome dinner (or needs time to prepare it), might only have a 1-hour window to vote... even with a “free evening”. That may be *just* enough time, but even one added responsibility, such as family or healthcare duties, might reduce that window so that voting might no longer be a practical option.

Following a provincial election that has a record-low turnout, accessibility to voting is one part of the conversation that we are called to keep in mind and keep pursuing.

Of course, we know that it’s more complicated than that. There are plenty of other reasons why people don’t vote. These range from dissatisfaction with the electoral system, such as the first-past-the-post dynamic, to general dissatisfaction with the candidates. And these are but aspects of a certain sense that the act of voting may have little bearing on the outcome of who is elected to govern and what decisions these officials might make.

Indeed, a sense of disaffection with the process and lack of agency in the decision-making process is often cited as a major reason why voter turnouts have consistently dwindled over the past several decades.

And yet, even if you feel your one vote won’t change the outcome of an election, no matter how it is that you voted *still* gives information about where the public will is – even spoiled ballots offer a measure of voter disaffection.

I've been spending quite a bit of space here on voting and voting accessibility, and that's because voting really is an important part of the democratic process. The risk lies on focusing on voting as the *only*, or the most important part of the process (as important as it is).

The adage that democracy is what happens between elections holds truths about where else people may engage in the decisions that affect all of us.

Democracy also happens in the community engagement with individuals and organizations that advocate for the diverse needs of the people. It happens in direct engagement with the elected officials that represent us – whether or not we voted for them. It happens when we stay informed about the news that affect our communities and when we hold these matters in conversation with those around us, our families, our friends, and our wider communities. It even happens in the mundane tasks of looking after our communities – the paperwork, the maintenance, the connections with the people that leaders serve.

In our church, our governance happens in many places. Votes are involved, but these are often confirmations of other important work, discussions, and potential decisions that have already been prepared with substantial legwork in the background. The votes are part of the mechanism of accountability, ensuring that we give active endorsement of the work of governance, but they are, in reality, a small portion of the work of the people, by our people, for our people.

Much of our democratic process involves looking after each other and our spaces; connecting in visits, phone calls and e-mails; even filing paperwork from time to time. This year, our Governance Documents Committee has been spending much time in formalizing the roles and tasks of different church bodies. Some votes are involved, but the bulk of the democratic work goes into *thinking* about how we want to handle our church business.

Even simply showing up, when possible, for community gatherings and events, is part of how we build the community, and become part of the decisions that affect it.

Last year, the Canadian Unitarian Council – which includes all of you who are members of this church, spent a lot of time and attention toward the adoption of our 8th Principle. Many of you might recall that it was, at times, a messy process. And after several months of discussion and deliberation, a vote last November confirmed its adoption, with a very high – though not unanimous – degree of approval, at 95% of the delegate vote.

That vote did not happen in isolation and it was not the only important part of the process. For many people, the discussions, workshops, and learning that happened along the way may have been even more significant, whether or not they ended up supporting the final vote.

As is often the case, not everyone was happy with the outcome, but it was an outcome that followed, as diligently as possible, the process we had in place.

Part of that process included a discussion on the *very processes* we use to make decisions like these, as well as many other decisions that we need to make as a denomination at the national level.

For this reason, one of the additional outcomes that came in the wake of adopting the 8th Principle – and in fact an example of its practice – was the creation of a Decision-making Exploration Team. Its name reflects its goal to explore options in decision-making processes that may serve us better in including a variety of voices and creating more spaces for participation, so that the outcomes of our collective decisions may better reflect the needs of our communities.

It doesn't mean that everyone will always be happy with every aspect of every decision – that's likely to be an unattainable goal – but the team

will look for ways of providing better spaces so that most folks may be satisfied with the process and may feel comfortable with the decisions that come out of it, even when they're not always everyone's preferred outcome.

Many models are on the table and being explored, including ideas of sociocracy and varieties of consensus-building mechanisms. Even the status quo, which relies heavily on established systems such as Robert's Rules of Order, continue to be on the table. (It is entirely possible that our current system could remain as is, and *if* we collectively decide to do that, it would be an intentional decision, rather than simply a matter of inertia because it's what we've been doing all along.)

Part of the process of exploring these processes included centring the presence and voices of youth and young adults, and people of colour, who are often not well represented in our communities. This doesn't mean that others don't have a voice in this process, it simply means that we're intentionally making space for voices that might not have had as much space before.

My friends, you can be part of this process. This week, you are invited to respond to a survey on decision-making processes, and you have until the end of the month, June 30, to complete it. This is not the only place where you can be part of the conversation, but it is an important place that has been intentionally set out for you. There will be other discussions coming up, and they will be made richer by the information that comes from this survey. And there will be votes involved at different times. Those votes will also be important, but they will not be the only parts of the process that matter.

My friends, the democratic process is part of our collective soul, and being part of it can be far more involved and enriching when we make space for it, when we seek out the opportunities to be part of it, and when we intentionally make space for as many of us to be part of it as possible.

My friends, our principles become alive when we practice them in every casual corner of our community.

So may it be,
Working together in between,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #1 Prayer for this House

Words: Louis Untermeyer, 1885-1977, © 1923 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, renewed 1951 by Louis Untermeyer, reprinted by perm. of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company

Music: Robert N. Quaille, b. 1867

OLDBRIDGE

Hymn #113 Where Is Our Holy Church?

Words: Edwin Henry Wilson, 1898-1993 ~-| © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Genevan psalter, 1551, adapt. By William Crotch, 1775-1847

ST. MICHAEL

Closing Hymn #300 With Heart and Mind

~-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1990 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Johann Hermann Schein, 1586-1630, harmony by J. S. Bach, 1685-1750

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