

The Right to Vote

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

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This week marked the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment to the US constitution, the amendment that says:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

The amendment was passed by congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920. It took more than a year after it was passed by congress for it to make its way through enough states to turn into an amendment. But that year was nothing compared to the decades of work that led up to that point.

This is such an interesting time for the 100th anniversary because the subject of voting is again a contentious one in our country right now—and I don't just mean who to vote for but *who gets* to vote: All citizens? Only those who have no felony record? How about people who have done their time for a crime?

And it isn't just who to vote for and who gets to vote, but also *how* voting may take place: By mail? In person?

There is contention over what safeguards are needed. Do voter ID laws help? Well, studies show they do more harm than good. How should we protect our election system against the threat of cyberattack or foreign interference? The system is so fragmented, there don't seem to be any easy answers.

And finally, there's also debate over to what extent the right to vote should be protected from unnecessary obstacles. Like requiring that people have a certain kind of ID in hand. Or holding elections on a weekday, when many people are working. Or, not having enough voting locations, so that people have to travel and wait in lines to vote. And right now, only 40% of polling places are fully accessible to people with disabilities.¹ So, when it comes to obstacles, a lot of the time that's the same as the question of who gets to vote.

These questions are of concern to Unitarian Universalists. Among the principles that ground and guide our denomination, the fifth one is: "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." We believe

people should have a say in the matters that concern them. “Nothing about us without us,” right? Every citizen should have the right to vote.

The way we remember stories about what we call “the right to vote,” obscures the fact that actually, it’s still not an absolute right. The main body of the constitution only mentions voting as an activity of the legislature. It does not say anything about US citizens and the right to vote. So that was not part of the original body of the document at all. Carnegie Mellon University Historian Lisa Tetrault reminds us that the founders were creating a republic, not a democracy.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

The first ten amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, also do not mention voting. It’s only when you get to the rest of the amendments that the rights of ordinary people to vote are mentioned at all, and even then the constitution doesn’t actually guarantee anyone the right. It only removes certain obstacles. The right to vote shall not be *denied* based on race. The right to vote should not be *denied* based on sex. But otherwise, it leaves the right to vote ultimately up to the discretion of the states. There is no constitutional guarantee. And that is why, even though many of us have been taught that the right to vote is central to American democracy, that right not been all the way won yet. We are still working on it. **Future generations will tell the story of this time.**

Let’s travel back in time to understand our location in history now.

If you want to tell a story about the nineteenth amendment, you really have to begin much earlier than 1919 or 1920. In fact, to get a fuller picture of the amendment’s meaning and impact, you have to start about a century earlier, with the struggle for abolition.

Many women who went onto become active in the woman suffrage movement first found their public voices in the cause of abolition. The link *and the conflict* that arose between the two movements had a kind of domino effect that clinked forward and can still be felt today.

When we think of the nineteenth amendment, the first person who comes to mind, of course, is Susan B. Anthony. And though she died at the age of 86, fourteen years before the amendment was passed, she was such a central figure in the suffrage movement, the amendment was named after her.

Susan B Anthony’s family had been active in the abolition movement. Anthony knew Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman, and she aided in the underground railroad. In the same years, Anthony also joined the leadership of the National Woman’s Rights Society. Leading up to the civil war, she ran campaigns both for women’s rights and against slavery.

After the civil war Anthony helped organize the National Woman Suffrage Association. Initially, the group's goal was that black and white women would win the right to vote alongside black men, through a fifteenth amendment to the constitution. But when the focus of the amendment shifted to race and not gender, Anthony—and her friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton—took offense. They did not want to see voting rights extended to black men before it was extended to women. Specifically, they did not want to see black men vote before *white* women. And from there, it got ugly fast.

(Most of us did not learn this part of the story in school when we were kids. But, well, when we talk about history during a Sunday service at First Unitarian church, it is usually not to reaffirm our country's national myths. It is to challenge them, and give us a better understanding of today).

Using a racial slur to refer to black people, Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that those “who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the declaration of independence or Webster's spelling book” should not get the right to vote first. And she said that the fifteenth amendment “creates antagonism everywhere between educated refined women and the lower orders of men.” Susan B. Anthony agreed.

I imagine Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas were appalled. Douglas was a lifelong supporter of women's rights. His support had played an important role in getting women's rights on the list of demands in the famous Seneca Falls convention in 1848. He and Harriet Tubman must have been upset, but I wonder if they were totally surprised.

The idea that black men should have the right to vote before white women was a challenge to Anthony's and Stanton's and many other white women's understanding of themselves in the social hierarchy. Although women as a sex and black people as a race had both been treated as *less than* by white men, white women had been able to wield their close relationships with white men to their own advantage.

If a white woman wished to show her dominance over a black person, even a man, all she had to do was complain to the white man in charge. This dynamic was so common that among black people there was a shorthand name for it: Miss Ann. A “Miss Ann” was an imperious, out of touch white woman who threw her weight around at black people.

Today when a white woman calls upon the authorities to bring down harsh discipline on a person of color, she is referred to as a Karen. Many white women take offense at this. And yet it's important to know that it doesn't come out of nowhere. It's a way of calling attention to the patterned behavior of an old racist hierarchy.

Not everyone in the women's rights movement was so attached to the racial hierarchy that they would stand in the way of the fifteenth amendment, though.

Lucy Stone, also a white woman, was another well-known activist. She had been at it from a very young age. At age 15, when her father paid for her brothers' college educations but refused to pay for hers, Stone got a job and saved up for ten years, until—in 1843—she put herself through Oberlin college (the only US college that accepted women at that time).^{iv} She taught reading to people who had fled or been freed from slavery. When she married, she kept her name, a radical thing to do at that time, and at their wedding she and her husband read aloud a “marriage protest” about the lack of women's legal and property rights in marriage.

When Stanton and Anthony opposed the 15th amendment, Lucy Stone split off from the National Woman Suffrage Association, and helped Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper organize a new group, the American Woman Suffrage Association. That group supported the fifteenth amendment, and they planned a state by state strategy for winning the vote for women. The opportunity was there for white women not to buy into—or further—white supremacist arguments about the right to vote. They could work in solidarity with the many women of color who had been working and continued to work for the same cause.

I mentioned the name Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. She is one of those heroes from American history whose name we should know. She was born in 1825 in Baltimore to free African American parents. Although her mother died when she was just three, thanks to an enlightened uncle, Harper received formal education from a young age. She grew up to be a public leader and a sought-after lecturer who traveled around the country working for abolition. She was the first woman teacher at Union Seminary. She was a prolific author who supported herself through her published writings. She wrote poetry, essays, and speeches, and was the first African American woman to publish a short story. She went on to write a novel that is considered a classic of African American literature. Which is also to say, a classic of *American* literature.

The year after the civil war ended, in 1866, Harper delivered a famous speech at the National Women's Rights Convention called, “We Are All Bound Up Together,” urging white suffragists to include African Americans in their fight for suffrage.

You know what? Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper *all* were Unitarians. All three were active members of Unitarian churches.

A while back, the New York Times ran an article that named some of the many black women and other women of color who led the fight for voting rights. Not only Harper, but also

the community organizer Juno Frankie Pierce and the journalists Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Elizabeth Piper Ensley and Ida B. Wells-Barnett...

We need to say their names.

Native American women such as Susette La Flesche Tibbles and Zitkala-Sa; queer women like the poet Angelina Weld Grimké and the educator Mary Burrill; Latina women like Jovita Idár; and Asian-American women like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who led thousands of marchers in a 1912 suffrage parade in New York.^v

They all fought for the vote as part of a broader struggle for equality, but their stories are not well known. They are told as footnotes in histories that center white people. And, in fact, despite all of this diverse participation in the movement, when it came time for the first suffrage parade in Washington DC in 1913, the white women leaders instructed black women to physically march at the back, so that white delegates from southern states would not be offended.

Not everyone complied with that nonsense. Ida B. Wells famously said “Either I go with you or not at all.” And then appeared right in the middle of the parade with the white members of her delegation.

Nevertheless, if you didn’t know better, you would think that after the fifteenth and the nineteenth amendments were both passed, everyone had the right to vote regardless of race or gender, right?

Well, no. The constitution still did not—and still does not—say that everyone has a right to vote. So what happened? Well, as the white backlash to Reconstruction grew and Jim Crow laws took effect, well before the nineteenth amendment was ever ratified, the states found sneaky ways to suppress black voters. They instituted grandfather clauses, poll taxes, and literacy tests. And they found not so sneaky ways, like violence.

That’s why when the nineteenth amendment passed, it resulted in white women being able to vote, but not black women. The amendment had done nothing to address the suppression happening against black women’s votes.

That would take another forty years, when as a result of the civil rights movement, the Voting Rights Act was signed into federal law. Up until then states could argue that their laws never mentioned race and therefore weren't racist. After the Voting Rights Act, a law only had to have a racist *impact* to be considered racist. Not only that, jurisdictions with a history of racist voter suppression had to get federal approval of their voting laws.

The impact was swift and undeniable. Voting rates among people of color shot up immediately, sometimes surpassing the rates of white voting.

The law was challenged multiple times in the Supreme Court, but it held. In 2006, Congress once again reauthorized the law and did so with a level of bipartisan agreement that seems unimaginable now: the vote was 390 to 33 in the House and *unanimous* in the Senate. President George W. Bush called the bill "an example of our continued commitment to a united America where every person is valued and treated with dignity and respect."^{vi}

But in 2013- during the tenure of our country's first black president—the Voting Rights Act was gutted by the conservative majority on the supreme court. Once the federal oversight clause was struck down, Texas immediately announced that its Voter ID law would go forward and redistricting maps would take effect. Since then we have seen a wave of voter suppression unlike anything since the early twentieth century.

Voter suppression takes place through ID laws, voter registration restrictions, gerrymandering, eliminating early voting, closing voting locations, and overly aggressive purging of voter rolls.

Between 2014 and 2016, almost 16 million voters were purged from the rolls, with the highest rates of purging happening in states that would have been subject to federal oversight under the voting rights act.^{vii} In 2018, seventy percent of Georgia voters who were purged were black.

Let's hear that one more time: In 2018, seventy percent of Georgia voters who were purged were black.

And across the country, counties with larger minority populations have fewer polling sites and poll workers per voter.

The problem, as you can see, is that our constitution does not guarantee a right to vote. It only removes a few obstacles. As long as individual jurisdictions are allowed to create new obstacles, there will be voter suppression. It's a big, slow motion game of whack-a-mole... with really big consequences.

This brings us to today. Today, we have for the very first time, a woman of color nominated as vice president by a major party. And today, we have not only widespread voter suppression, but also a president explicitly trying to put up additional obstacles and discredit the votes that do come in by sowing doubt about their validity.

This is a great time for those of us who believe that everyone should have a voice to really get behind that. We may be staying home but we are not staying quiet. This centennial celebration is a great time to build on the work of those who came before us, with a deep commitment to equity and anti-racism.

Here's one way you can do that. Our church's denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has launched a national UU the Vote strategy. It's a non-partisan campaign to get out the vote. It strategically targets places with high voter suppression. And you can join in from home. Go to uuthevote.org to learn more about that. And then if you're interested in participating as part of a congregational team, contact me or Laira Magnusson at the church and we'll put you in touch with Peggy Roberts. By starting now, we can help people figure out if they've been purged from the rolls without knowing it so they can get re-registered, or help them figure out how to apply for an absentee ballot if they are not going to be able to vote at a physical polling place due to the pandemic or other issues. That effort is at UUtheVote.org.

The other thing that's important to do right now is to believe in and safeguard your own vote. No matter what state you will be voting in, your vote is really important. There's the electoral college, and then there's the message that raw numbers of votes send. Both are more important than ever.

So I want you to be prepared early. Check your own registration status on the secretary of state's website. If you do a search for "Vote NM" that website comes right up for this state.

If you're going to vote by mail, you have to apply for that mail in ballot. Go ahead and do that now. Don't wait.

Since you know you'll be mailing something, next time you go to the grocery store, make sure you pick up some stamps, too. And then don't let potential mail delays in November cost you your vote. Actually, drop your ballot off by hand if you can. But if you are mailing in a ballot, think of Oct 20 as election day.

I encourage you do all of these things... and while you're at it, help someone else vote, too. Start with the people you know. My kids are both in their 20's. I plan to start hounding them about their absentee ballot applications as soon as we end this service. It's my patriotic duty and it's just good parenting.

Lucy Stone died in 1893, twenty-seven years before the nineteenth amendment was ratified. The last words she ever spoke were: “Make the world better.” Make the world better.

She believed we could. And now, I believe we can.

May it be so.

ⁱ According to the ACLU. Citation below.

ⁱⁱ I’ve drawn much of the following information from this informative interview with Lisa Tetrault, Errin Haines, and Adele Logan Alexander: “100 Years Later: The Complicated History Of The Women’s Suffrage Movement.” | *On Point*, WBUR, 18 Aug. 2020, www.wbur.org/onpoint/2020/08/18/women-vote-19th-amendment.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also consulted: Parker, Kathleen R. *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism*. Meadville Lombard Press, 2007.

^{iv} Emerson, Dorothy May, et al. *Standing before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*. Skinner House Books, 2000.

^v Chambers, Veronica, et al. “Meet the Brave but Overlooked Women of Color Who Fought for the Vote.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 July 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/books/finish-the-fight-excerpt.html?referringSource=articleShare.

^{vi} Liptak, Adam. *Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act*. 25 June 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html.

^{vii} “ACLU News & Commentary.” *American Civil Liberties Union*, www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/.