

Democracy: A Conversation, Part Two

By Dick Withers

The first Unitarian President of the United States, John Adams, famously wrote to his wife, Abigail Adams, just a few days after signing the Declaration of Independence, observing that:

“...democracy never lasts long...it murders itself....It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious or less avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. Those passions are the same in all men...and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence and cruelty....”

Nearly fifty years later, our second Unitarian President, John Quincy Adams, was elected as the 6th President under the Constitution; he observed in his inaugural address:

“If there have been those who doubted whether a confederated representative democracy were a government competent to the wise and orderly management of the common concerns of a mighty nation, those doubts have been dispelled....”

Our second workshop last winter focused on the many forms that democratic process takes within governments and in society at large. We examined the checks and balances - the guardrails - that promote a healthy democracy.



General Assembly - Unitarian Universalist Association

We compared forms of governance including pure democracies, confederacies and republics. We examined the advantages and disadvantages of each.

One interesting exploration involved the likely influences of the Iroquois Confederation, known as the Haudenosaunee (“people of the longhouse”) on the development of American constitutional principles. See the one-page handout below.

We held two group discussion sessions in our second workshop. In the first session, we addressed 3 questions: what factors cause democratic institutions to fail? what factors sustain democratic institutions/ and which UU values contribute to a democratic process (and how)? The discussion worksheet is attached. How would you answer these questions?

The second discussion session began with the question, ‘how is our congregation like: a pure democracy, a republic, a confederacy, a monarchy?’ And we concluded the discussion with the question, “what is the role of conscience in a democratic process.”

One of the conclusions we came to was that each form of governance, of decision-making, contained processes that provided individuals (a few or many) the opportunity to be heard, to participate, and to influence the result.

We continued our second workshop with a discussion of the guardrails - the norms, checks and balances - that sustain healthy democratic process. We focused on the rules and norms that may protect the individual from the ‘tyranny’ of the majority and that also empower individuals to participate by providing transparency (open meetings, open records, opportunities to be heard, etc.)

Discussion (in our first workshop as well as the second and third) often returned to the importance of education. And education includes skill building and training. The ‘rules of engagement’ can be used - or abused - by those who know the rules. And that’s one reason we sometimes dislike Robert’s Rules of Order or the filibuster.

Nevertheless, Robert’s Rules and similar parliamentary procedures have kept many deliberative assemblies and board rooms from going ‘off the rails’ so to speak. And - like most UU Congregations, our bylaws include Roberts Rules when all other procedures fail.

Our love-hate relationship with Robert’s Rules is reflected in the parody of the hymn “*Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past*” by Rev. Chris Raible which we sung during the workshop (with vigor...). See “*Robert’s Our Rules for Motions Passed*” below.

Ironically, most of our observations about democratic process were best summarized by the Chinese Artificial Intelligence (AI) *DeepSeek*. And these observations will be explored further in Part Three: “UUs and the Future of Democracy”. Stay tuned!

ATTACHMENTS

DISCUSSION WORKSHEETS (2 PAGES)

ABOUT THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

“ROBERT’S OUR RULES FOR MOTIONS PASSED”

BASIC ELEMENTS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS
- BY *DEEPSEEK*



Samples from Dick's collection of 10+ editions of Robert's Rules of Order

Discussion Worksheet: Democracy Breakout Groups - FIRST SESSION

What factors cause democratic institutions to fail?

What factors sustain democratic institutions?

Which UU values contribute to a democratic process (and how)?

Discussion Worksheet: Democracy Breakout Groups - SECOND SESSION

How is our congregation like a pure democracy?

a republic?

a confederacy?

a monarchy?

What is the role of conscience in a democratic process?

Robert's Our Rules for Motions Passed

[Raible: Tune of "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" - SLT 281]

A D A D/E7 A
Robert's our rules for motions passed,
A B7 E7
Our guide for votes to come,
 A D E7 B7 E7
Our standard midst the stormy blast
 D E7 A
Of speeches wearisome.

A D A D/E7 A
Our scripture sure can truth impart,
A B7 E7
The text to which we turn
 A D E7 B7 E7
From 'call to order" at the start
 D E7 A
'Til we at last adjourn.

A D A D/E7 A
Wheras, therefore do we resolve
A B7 E7
All questions clearly stated;
 A D E7 B7 E7
All human problems we will solve
 D E7 A
By vote, when they're debated.

A D A D/E7 A
We want to vote! We want to leave!
A B7 E7
We want the talk to end!
 A D E7 B7 E7
Oh what a tangled web we weave
 D E7 A
With motions to amend.

Repeat the first verse

The **Iroquois Confederacy** was a union of Native American tribes that lived in what is now New York and beyond:

- **Formation**

The confederacy was formed around 1350–1600 by Dekanawidah and Hiawatha. The five original tribes were the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. The Tuscarora joined in 1722, making the confederacy known as the Six Nations.

- **Name**

The confederacy members called themselves the Haudenosaunee, which means "The People of the Longhouse". They saw their confederacy as a symbolic longhouse, with each tribe representing a part of the longhouse.

- **Government**

The confederacy was governed by a matriarchal hierarchy and a men's council. The clan mother of each clan chose a male clan chief, who, with approximately 50 others, then formed the Grand Council of Chiefs. The council's vote had to be unanimous to make decisions.

- **Role in history**

The confederacy played a strategic role in the struggle between the French and British for control of North America. The confederacy also fought in the American Revolution, with the Oneida and Tuscarora siding with the colonists and the rest of the league fighting for the British.

- **Other characteristics**

The confederacy is often characterized as one of the world's oldest participatory democracies. The Iroquois were also considered a matrilineal society, with descent passed through the mother.

- **Influence**

Many historians note that Thomas Jefferson was likely influenced by the example of the Iroquois Confederacy when developing the principles incorporated into the the U.S. constitution.

The Chinese AI DeepSeek was queried about the basic elements of the democratic process. This was the response:

The **basic elements of the democratic process** are essential features that ensure fair, inclusive, and accountable governance. These elements include:

1. Free and Fair Elections

- Regular, competitive elections where citizens choose their representatives.
- Universal suffrage (the right to vote for all adult citizens).
- Secret ballots to prevent coercion.
- Independent electoral commissions to oversee elections.

2. Political Participation

- Citizens have the right to vote, run for office, and engage in political discussions.
- Freedom to join or form political parties and advocacy groups.
- Protests, petitions, and civic engagement are allowed.

3. Rule of Law

- Equality before the law—no one is above it, including government officials.
- Independent judiciary to uphold constitutional rights.
- Legal protections for civil liberties (speech, press, assembly, etc.).

4. Protection of Civil Liberties

- Freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly.
- Protection from arbitrary arrest or discrimination.
- Right to privacy and due process.

5. Accountability and Transparency

- Government officials must answer for their actions.
- Open government processes and access to public information.
- Mechanisms to combat corruption (e.g., audits, oversight bodies).

6. Checks and Balances

- Separation of powers (executive, legislative, judiciary) to prevent abuse.
- Oversight between branches (e.g., courts reviewing laws, legislatures impeaching leaders).

7. Pluralism and Inclusivity

- Multiple political parties and viewpoints are allowed.
- Minority rights are protected against "tyranny of the majority."
- Diverse groups have representation in decision-making.

8. Peaceful Transfer of Power

- Leaders accept electoral results and leave office when their terms end.
- No use of force or fraud to retain power.

9. ****Informed Citizenry****

- Access to unbiased information and education.
- Free and independent media to hold power accountable.

10. ****Decentralization of Power****

- Federalism or local governance to prevent centralization of authority.
- Devolution of powers to regional or municipal bodies.

These elements work together to ensure that democracy functions effectively, balancing majority rule with minority rights while maintaining stability and public trust.