



## This is Still What Democracy Looks Like

**Sandy Sorensen**  
Director, Washington Office

When I attend marches, vigils, and actions for justice these days, I almost always hear this call-and-response chant: one section of the gathering will chant, "Show me what democracy looks like!" and a second group will respond, "This is what democracy looks like!"

In the wake of last week's deeply disappointing Senate failure to restore and expand voting rights, that question hits a little harder. But the answer, I think, is the same—we are still what democracy looks like.

The Hebrew prophets wisely recognized the necessity of lament, the need to name the pain rightly in order to create the space for true healing. So many of you have labored so very hard, for so many years, in so many ways to expand access to voting and to restore and strengthen our battered election infrastructure. So it is important to allow ourselves some time to lament the failure of our elected officials to pass critical voting rights legislation, and the failure to place the integrity of our democracy over Senate rules. We know from many faith teachings and from our own personal and collective experiences that history is not linear. It is not a straight line continually moving forward. As writer and activist Rebecca Solnit notes in her book *Hope in the Dark*:

Cause-and-effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later, sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement, and millions do.... All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope.

And so, the work continues with even greater urgency. I recently attended a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day march for voting rights, and there were signs with the image of the late Rep. John Lewis quoting him, "Democracy is not a state. It is

an act.” So, in the midst of our grief and disappointment in the actions of our lawmakers, we know **our** actions are more important than ever.

There is much we can do. Many state legislatures are just beginning their legislative sessions, so now is an ideal time to re-engage our state-based policy advocacy, identifying allies to introduce state legislation to expand voting access and repair the damage done by the wave of restrictive state voting bills passed in 2021.

As we enter the 2022 midterm election year, we can redouble our efforts to help people engage in nonpartisan election participation and resist voter suppression in all its forms: registering voters, lifting up the issues, showing up at town hall meetings and candidate appearances, and making unflagging efforts to empower voters and get them to the polls, even in the midst of setbacks. We can make voting rights a prominent election issue by engaging in social media messaging, writing letters to the editors and op-eds, engaging our neighbors and communities in education and conversation. We can recommit to the work of passing essential federal voting rights legislation, even as we acknowledge our deep disappointment and our weariness. “Giving up on voting rights now would be unconscionable,” as columnist E.J. Dionne, Jr. wrote recently in a *Washington Post* editorial.

The poet Amanda Gorman, who read at the 2021 presidential inauguration ceremony, beautifully names the place where we are now in an essay recently published in the *New York Times*. She writes:

If nothing else, this must be known: Even as we’ve grieved, we’ve grown; even fatigued we’ve found that this hill we climb is one we must mount together. We are battered, but bolder; worn, but wiser. I’m not telling you to *not* be tired or afraid. If anything, the very fact that we’re weary means we are, by definition, changed; we are brave enough to listen to, and learn from, our fear. This time will be different because this time *we’ll* be different. We already are.

This is what democracy looks like.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Sandy Sorensen is the Director of our Washington, D.C. office for the United Church of Christ.**