Policy Governance

Why It's the Right Thing to Do

By

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September 20, 2026

When we boil it all down, there are only two approaches to governance: Liberalism and authoritarianism. Liberalism is from the Latin word for "freedom," *libertas*; the root of which, *liber,* means "free," as in "liberty." Authoritarianism is from the Latin word *auctor*, meaning "master, leader, author." A liberal community, if it is truly liberal, means its members have a fair say in how they are governed. They may not all agree with the rules and leaders they collectively choose, but they should all have an equal voice in how they are adopted and chosen. An authoritarian community has one ultimate authority who governs from the top down. The authority may delegate power to others but is the person or body that selects who they will be and retains the ultimate authority to make all decisions.

From the outset, I do not wish to set up a false dichotomy of good vs. bad between these two mindsets. In any society, no matter how liberal, personal freedoms must be limited, especially when they infringe upon the rights and welfare of others. In the U.S., like many, ours is a constitutional democracy that ensures individual freedoms and social structures do not infringe upon the basic rights and welfare of others. Individuals must also contribute fairly to the welfare of society, which is why, even if we should eventually overcome death, we will never outlive taxes.

Yet there are those in our liberal society who believe they should be free of all limitations, including taxes, rules, regulations, and the rights of others. They like to disguise their greed and selfishness as wholesome "conservatism," but there's often little that's conservative about them, other than wanting to conserve as much as they can for themselves. A more accurate term is "neoliberalism." For theirs is a new kind of liberalism with a notion of freedom that far exceeds the liberalism of the Enlightenment thinkers who established our constitutional government that endeavors to guarantee and protect the rights of everyone. Neoliberals are so liberal, by contrast, that they wish to be untaxed and unburdened by any rules or regulations or governments that prohibit them from taking what they want, even at the expense of our shared environment and the rights and welfare of others.

On the other hand, there are many situations in which we want to rely upon authorities, especially when they are experts in their fields. A schoolteacher or professor ought to have the authority to teach what they want, how they want, and to maintain a level of behavioral decorum in their classrooms. Doctors and scientists ought to have a greater say in health standards and practices than religious leaders and conspiracy theorists. Companies ought to be run by the CEOs, managers, and bosses who have been hired to do so, while following labor laws and other regulations. Militaries and police departments must be hierarchal in

structure, while also adhering to their own rules and codes, as well as to the law in general. Journalists should have the authority to report as they see fit, with unrestricted free speech and reasonable access to those in power.

Virtually anyone who has been given a responsibility must have the authority to carry out their duties, including the freedom to make the decisions required to do so. Yet, everyone who has been given such freedom also has the responsibility to exercise their authority within the limitations established to protect the rights and welfare of others. That's democracy. It's not about freedom, but about maintaining basic rights within a relatively free society and government structure. Democracy is an attempt to create balance between two opposing social necessities, freedom and authority; liberty and limitations.

Much, if not most, if not nearly all conflict throughout human history has resulted from the failure to find such balance. It has been the result of one group wanting unjust authority over another; or of one group wishing to be free of the limitations forced upon them, whether those limitations are just or not. Such balance, however, isn't lost because democracy doesn't work, but because we're not working democracy. People are usually fine going along with whatever the government does—going along with the crowd—until there's a decision they dislike, then they begin lobbing all sorts of *ad hominem* accusations against those in charge. In recent years, I myself have twice been publicly compared to Donald Trump by members of our congregation because certain individuals didn't like the decisions I made.

I find it tragic that in our society many, if not most, if not nearly all of us, are not devoted to the principles of freedom and democracy until a decision's been made we disagree with. Most of the time we want to control the speech, beliefs, and ways of others so that most of society reflects our own. It's been this way throughout most of human history. But our society is supposed to be different. We have a Constitution that begins, "*We the People* of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." It's a remarkable first statement, a government established by the governed, not the governors, let alone, by a king or aristocracy. Nor is it established for the benefit of those in power, but in the name of unity, justice, peace, security, welfare, and the liberty of all, those alive now and those still to be born. It then goes on to set up a detailed division and balance of powers to make certain no authority ever has too much of it. As difficult as it has often been to live up to, as challenging as it has remained to find balance between freedom and authority, between our liberties and limitations, it is a wondrous document the principles of which ought to be the driving force in the heart of every American, and the envy of all the world.

Yet, the founders soon found that freedom from authoritarianism through the division of powers wasn't enough. In 1791, only four years after the Constitution was adopted, its first Amendments, the Bill of Rights, were also signed into law, protecting, not the rights of those in charge, nor further detailing their division of responsibilities. It was about further limiting their powers to reinforce the freedoms of its citizens; freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, to assemble and to protest, and to bear arms; freedom from the military occupying our homes or from otherwise searching and seizing our belongings. It also guarantees due process and other legal rights that limit the law's power over us.

These principles, this glorious endeavor, was not born in a vacuum, but after centuries of authoritarian abuse in which citizens were considered the subjects of those who ruled over them; monarchs and priests alike. But after the tremendous social disruption caused by the invention of the Printing Press in 1440 and the spread of unauthorized ideas coinciding with rising literacy rates, the old authorities were losing their grip. They responded by attempting to do the impossible, put the genie back in the bottle. It was, for instance, only after the printing press—only after freer expression—that book burnings, inquisitions, and heresy trials emerged.

Worse than this was more than a century of brutal persecutions and holy wars. This was the milieu out of which the Enlightenment, which birthed our democracy, arose. As philosopher Susan Neiman writes, "the Enlightenment emerged from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood … It was a history of waves of plague without cure, and ever-returning religious wars in which countless people died … Women were regularly burned alive as suspected witches, men thrown chained into dungeons for writing a pamphlet … Small wonder that no era in history wrote more, or more passionately, about the problem of evil. Into this landscape the Enlightenment introduced the very idea of humanity …"[1] Including, I might add, the U.S., Constitution, and its unprecedented Bill of human rights.

But today, our democracy is threatened, not because Donald Trump is in power, but because too many of us are not devoted to its remarkable principles. Too many of us think we should be free to do whatever we want no matter the consequences but can care less about the freedoms of others. This has always been so, which is why, despite our devotion to freedom, we allowed the scourges of slavery and all manners of inequality to continue for centuries, some to this day. Today, as in the past, too many of us are devoted to freedom and democracy only when it suits us, rather than as a principle we must adhere to even when it does not.

But what about us Unitarians? We're different, aren't we? Our religion was born of the Enlightenment and its commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person; upheld through freedom, reason, and tolerance. Alas, like the U.S., our once liberal religion has traded these hallowed principles for dogmatism, intolerance, and authoritarianism. Although I could provide many examples, among the most disturbing is the control it has seized over our ministers and their once free pulpits. Between 1961, when the UU Association was established, and 2020, it had permanently removed eight ministers from fellowship, seven for sexual misconduct and one for financial malfeasance—eight in fifty-nine years. During just the past six years it has disfellowshipped twelve ministers, only four for sexual or financial misconduct. The others, including yours truly, have been disfellowshipped for things they have written or said, which the UUA has labeled "hostile," "bullying," "unbecoming," "racist and oppressive speech," and "noncooperation." Four of them, one-third, have been disfellowshipped during the past year, alone.

The UUA has become an illiberal, dogmatic, and authoritarian organization that unjustly discredits, demonizes, and dismisses those who dare challenge it. And, yet, even knowing this, many Unitarians remain part of it? Why? I don't know. I also wonder why so many Republicans still go along with Trump, who has proven to be an authoritarian leader if ever there was one? I'm don't know the answer to these questions, but I'm guessing it is the same answer for Unitarians and Republicans alike.

I'm now halfway through my talk and you might be asking, "I thought this was supposed to be about Policy Governance," not a history lesson. But I can assure you, all I have been talking about so far is Policy Governance, the method of governance our congregation's bylaws require us to adhere to. The full title of my sermon is "Policy Governance: Why It's the Right Thing to Do." To understand it you must truly understand—and feel—what liberalism is all about. For Policy Governance is a form of democracy that embodies the liberal principles we say we are about. Like the U.S. Constitution, it disperses authority throughout the community, while setting up broad limitations in which its members are free to operate and make decisions. Yet, I often hear people complain it's too confusing and that they can't understand it.

I believe this is so because of our primate brains, which, like those of almost all apes, are neurologically authoritarian. This doesn't mean all humans want to rule over others, but that in any situation the first thing we want to know is who is in charge. Wherever we go, our first instinct is to look for the silverback to whom we trade our freedom and autonomy in exchange for belonging and protection. This is why maintaining a primary devotion to the freedom that both our nation and religion are supposed to be about has been so difficult; because many of us don't want to be free as much as we want to be in charge or to be under the protection of those who are.

You're likely to recall the obedience experiments of Yale professor Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s. A majority of his subjects would administer what they believed were painful electrical shocks to others, even when they didn't want to, simply because they were ordered to by an authority figure. One memorable variation of the experiment involved beginning with two potential authority figures in the same room with the subject. Without knowing who to obey, the subjects were able to assert their autonomy and refuse to administer any shocks. But as soon as the authority was established, most of them fell right in line. This explains why some of Trump's greatest critics—Ted Cruz, Mitch McConnell, Mike Johnson, Kevin McCarthy, Kristi Noem, and others—were among his strongest supporters after he was elected. It may also explain why so many Unitarian Universalists are also going along with the authoritarian capture of our once liberal religion. Before an authority is established, we can maintain our freedom to think for ourselves. Once it has been established, our greater instinct is to obey.

I believe it's the same for all of us. True liberals develop the principles to help them overcome such instincts, but our communities, like our societies, are a mixed bag. There are always those among us who are more authoritarian than liberal, even if they don't realize it. They must get their way and won't stop until they do, believing a decision they disagree with automatically makes it undemocratic. But Democracy doesn't mean everyone gets a vote on every decision, or else we would have to keep a quorum of members always at hand to conduct the most rudimentary kinds of business. Our bylaws and policies delegate such authority so that our community and staff can function.

Social psychologist Erich Fromm once complained that our American democracy doesn't go far enough. As citizens, we have come to think democracy means voting for our leaders every couple of years, maybe even supporting and campaigning for some—but voting is pretty much the extent of our freedom. But Fromm suggested democracy should begin in town hall meetings that meet monthly to deliberate important issues, then to scale up by sending members to a true House of Commons that itself selects representatives, who then work their way up, and so forth all the way to Washington. Fromm's democratic decentralization is a different way of doing democracy than we are accustomed to. So is Policy Governance. In fact, like Fromm's ideas, it's even more democratic than the U.S. system.

Here's how it works. Our members are the ultimate authority, but their authority is channeled through the bylaws they approve, the board leaders they elect, and the ministers they call. That's it. They don't, as individuals, have the right to dictate how things must be done. They do so collectively, or not at all. The bylaws, in turn, spell out the responsibilities and division of power of those the congregation has chosen or called to lead. Under Policy

Governance, our Board must govern by establishing broad policies that are written as limitations, not prescriptions. They create, that is, general boundaries in which our staff and teams are free to make their own decisions, yet must remain non-directive. That is, they don't have the authority to say precisely how specific tasks must be done. General policies are more democratic because they apply equally to everyone. A board that governs situationally by merely making decisions on the spot will ultimately become unfair because its choices will become inconsistent—this person or group can, this person or group can't.

Most importantly, Policy Governance fairly distributes authority by allowing those with responsibility to have the authority they need to make their own decisions about how they will accomplish what they must. The congregation determines our bylaws, approves our budget, elects officers, and calls and dismisses ministers. The Board adopts and alters broad policies and determines the long-term vision and direction of the church. The minister handles our services and functions as our chief executive. Operations and staff handle the regular operations, business, and work of the church.

It's different than the kind of democracy we're used to in the U.S., which is limited to just voting once in a while. It's even more democratic because it gives more people the freedom to participate in what we do, through a broader and fairer system of distributed authority. But if, like most apes, or Stanley Milgram's subjects, or some Republican legislators, you're just wanting to know who the person in charge is, you'll never understand Policy Governance, nor, I dare say, what it means to truly be liberal, or liberated. Believing a decision made through this process isn't fair just because one disagrees with it, or that one is right, so the system be damned, is authoritarian, not democratic or free.

More than fifteen years ago, when the congregation was still considering me for this position, I was standing before you in this pulpit when one of our members, Penny Reid asked, "Ours is a Policy Governance church. What do you think about Policy Governance?" After, talking about my experience with it, I concluded by saying, "Not only do I believe in it, as liberal Unitarians I consider it our moral imperative."

Penny responded, "Good answer," because she understands what it means. Those confused by it may be confused because they are asking the wrong question. They're asking who's in charge? Who do I go to overturn a decision I disagree with? But understanding Policy Governance, our more involved system of democracy, our more liberal approach to community, requires us to ask who does it free? As apes, we'll never understand. But as liberals, liberated from the authoritarian mindset, it's the only way of being together we can understand.

[1] Neiman, Susan. Left Is Not Woke (pp. 33-34). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.