

Paper

Transcending Partisanship: From Factionalism to Universal Participation

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Abstract

Contemporary democratic systems face mounting crises as increasing partisan entrenchment supplants effective governance in favour of adversarial gamesmanship and reduces citizens to passive spectators. This essay examines how factionalism undermines democracy by constraining essential freedoms—to choose suitable candidates, to access reliable information, to deliberate meaningfully, and to flourish collectively. Political parties function as “machines that generate collective passions,” prioritizing electoral victory over truth-seeking and principled deliberation. Partisanship thus tends over time to descend into personal attacks, disinformation campaigns, and polarized alienation that makes genuine democratic participation nearly impossible. Reform measures within partisan systems can, at best, slow this trajectory of partisan politics.

Drawing on Bahá'í teachings and administrative experience, we propose an alternative framework based on universal participation and collaborative truth-seeking. The Bahá'í approach features elections without campaigns or nominations, decision-making through consultation, and multi-level learning processes that integrate grassroots experience with institutional guidance. This system eliminates the us-versus-them mentality inherent in partisan politics, fostering organic relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions working toward common objectives. Through “learning in action”—where all participants contribute to generating knowledge for collective betterment—communities can transcend competitive adversarialism and enable genuine democratic participation. Central to this alternative model is the recognition that noble ends cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Divisive practices cannot therefore succeed in achieving the ideal aspiration of politics: to allow humanity to flourish as one unified yet diverse whole.

Introduction

In Western liberal societies, it has generally been taken for granted that democracy is the best system of governance and that the vitality and justness of any nation depend in large measure on how democratic it is. The cardinal principle of democracy is that the people should be free to rule themselves, either directly by participating in political decision-making or indirectly by electing those who do so on their behalf. In the latter case, those elected to lead have an obligation to exercise the will of the people; they are, first and foremost, accountable to the electorate.

Democracy has been justified on various grounds. On fundamental grounds, it has been viewed as a good in itself, reflecting as a system of governance the general spirit of the Enlightenment, which,

according to Immanuel Kant, consists of “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” where “*Immaturity* is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”¹ Democracy has similarly been justified on instrumental grounds in that it produces better epistemological and social outcomes than its alternatives. For example, many have considered it to be the best system for enabling truth to prevail since, at its best, it encourages citizens or their representatives to employ reason when making decisions of public import.² And because, in its modern form, it subjects those in power to the rule of law—itsself understood to be an expression of the democratic will of the people—it has been esteemed on both theoretical and empirical grounds to be the system most conducive to protecting human rights.³

Despite these theoretical strengths and historical achievements, the efficacy of democracy as currently practiced has lately been called into question by many thinkers who lament its decline—although they do so with the hope that it can be revitalized before it is too late.⁴ For example, Anne Applebaum warns that we may already be living in the twilight of democracy⁵ and succumbing to growing networks of autocracy worldwide,⁶ while Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor note a rise in “sympathy for authoritarianism, antipathy to informed dialogue, and delusion by conspiracy theories.”⁷ In their analysis, “[p]olitical parties are broken, functioning as little more than ideologically polarized fundraising machines.”⁸ More ubiquitous is the degeneration of democracy itself, which takes the form of “declining citizen efficacy, weakening local communities, fraying intergenerational bonds, evaporating small-scale economic opportunity, and eroding social ties that had once knit citizens together across lines of difference and fostered solidarity.”⁹ Calhoun and his colleagues maintain that a thriving democracy must uphold liberty, equality, and solidarity. Yet, over the past 50 years or so, our democracies have increasingly privileged the former to the detriment of the latter two. Accordingly, they have undermined collective commitment to a common good, which is essential for any democracy to thrive.

These thinkers therefore call for a reconceptualization of democracy in view of its strengths, vulnerabilities, and present challenges. But they argue that democracy may not even have a future

¹ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”* (1784)

² For an overview of epistemic arguments for democracy, and critiques of those arguments, see Simone Chambers, *Contemporary Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), chap. 7.

³ See for instance this statement by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-democracy-and-human-rights> [accessed 25 June 2025].

⁴ These include Madeleine Albright, Anne Applebaum, David Brooks, Jonah Goldberg, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, Lee McIntyre, and Timothy Snyder, to name just a few. See Todd Smith and Ben Kelly, ‘Public Discourse and Wilful Incommensurability: A Case for Attentive Free Speech’, *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9 (2024).

⁵ Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), p. 185.

⁶ Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc.: Dictators That Want to Run the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2024).

⁷ Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 208.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

without radical social transformation.¹⁰ Such transformation involves cultivating citizen empowerment, building inclusive solidarity, and countering efforts to consolidate permanent power. It requires adopting an experimental mode of action premised on the necessity to think big, appreciate the interconnected nature of our needs and challenges, and rejuvenate commitment to the public good.

This is a daunting agenda, which is complicated by what Michael Karlberg identifies as a fundamental problem: democracy's tethering to competition. Karlberg¹¹ argues that ailments such as the ones these thinkers point to today—particularly the fraying of solidarity—are logical outcomes of this competitive foundation, which has long held hegemonic influence in the world as the primary logic of social organization. This hegemony is reflected in the more realist definition of democracy, crystallized by economist Joseph Schumpeter in the 1930s, that eschews the lofty ideal of rule by the people. For Schumpeter, the great virtue of democracy is not that it enables people to decide political questions. He argues that “the people” are not a veritable collective entity that can form rational, considered opinions on issues. Instead, the crux of democracy is the selection of representatives who will make political decisions, and central to this selection is the struggle for electoral success.¹² Democracy thus casts its central player—the *demos*—in a passive role. This raises a crucial question: must democratic governance necessarily be grounded in competition, or are there alternative frameworks that could enable genuine popular participation?

Proposition

With these considerations in mind, in this paper we examine the specific role that partisanship plays in perpetuating political passivity and degrading democratic discourse more broadly. Drawing on insights from the Bahá'í teachings and community experience, we also maintain that the transformation many seek requires more radical change than most thinkers envision. Such transformation involves moving beyond factionalism, purging the electoral process of ego and divisive elements, and embracing a mode of associating and decision-making that fosters universal participation.

Central to our proposal is the sentiment expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that “in this world of being, all things must ever be made new.”¹³ Bahá'ís believe that the “immutable law of change”¹⁴ built into reality at all levels—from the inner workings of stars to complex biological systems to human societies—applies to political systems that have as their basis centuries-old conceptions and that are now clearly demonstrating their fragility in the face of rising global challenges. They also believe that

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 209.

¹¹ Michael Karlberg, ‘Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?’, *The Bahá'í World* (2006).

¹² Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

¹³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 23. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdu-baha/selections-writings-abdu-baha/1#324741256> [accessed 25 June 2025]

¹⁴ In Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p.42, it is stated: “Why should these [ideals, institutions, etc.], in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution?” <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/1#369510938> [accessed 25 June 2025]

humanity need not feel beholden to its current systems, notwithstanding the weight of their legacies or how conducive to human betterment they may have once been. Instead, by drawing upon the strengths of these systems while dispassionately assessing their weaknesses, humanity can transform its institutional structures into a form consistent with the exigencies of the present age.

In this connection, we discuss, first, how partisanship stifles meaningful political engagement; second, the implications of these problems for various freedoms essential to such engagement; and third, some of the dispositions and practices that especially befit a political realm made new. Fundamental to the latter is an approach to learning in which all feel inspired to participate in a process of studying, acting, reflecting, and consulting on matters of relevant social concern.

Problems with Partisanship

From a Bahá'í perspective, partisanship or factionalism—a longstanding taken-for-granted feature of Western liberal democracies—is not inherently democratic. Instead, it undermines the very purpose of democracy. This is not a new idea. David Hume observes, “Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other.”¹⁵ In the same paragraph, Hume refers to factions as “weeds” of the state. Below, we examine the deficiencies of factionalism by considering the functioning of political parties in general and the associated electoral process in particular.

Political Parties

Political parties are claimed to serve several functions. For instance, they serve a pragmatic coordination function in societies where the general public lacks the time or inclination to engage directly in policy deliberations. In effect, the people delegate this responsibility to specialist bodies—political parties—that negotiate policies among themselves and periodically present their policy positions to the public for approval through voting.¹⁶ Yet, even this essentially pragmatic and potentially benevolent view of parties requires us to accept an anaemic version of democracy, where—in line with Schumpeter’s view—the people’s opportunity to “rule” comes only once every few years and is limited to casting a single ballot at election time.

The problems with parties deepen when we consider other functions often ascribed to them. Some argue that parties are uniquely positioned to reveal their competitors’ flaws and hold them accountable. This view assumes that most political actors have a vested interest in disclosing and upholding the truth. While it is understood that some politicians will try to manipulate the truth in their favour, party competition supposedly limits what they can get away with in pursuing their political aspirations. By highlighting the misleading or harmful positions of their opponents, political parties prevent each other from monopolizing power. In so doing, they ostensibly embody John Stuart Mill’s vision for an epistemically progressive society¹⁷—one in which argument plays a vital role in social progress by

¹⁵ David Hume, ‘Of Parties in General, 1742’, in *Perspectives on Political Parties: Classic Readings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002), p. 33–36.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 176.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978).

allowing dissenters to challenge the biases of dominant positions, expose their deficiencies and failings, and thus potentially reveal more fruitful ways of thinking and living.

However, these theoretical ideals typically break down in practice. Such breakdowns validate concerns articulated millennia ago by Plato,¹⁸ who warned that democratic deliberation could be undermined by people's greater allegiance to their competing interests over truth. Indeed, the value Mill places on subjecting all views to scrutiny and criticism is perhaps best represented not by mainstream democratic politics but by the scientific community, which, when functioning well, harnesses this epistemic process to the common pursuit of truth.¹⁹ In a political realm infected by factionalism and partisanship, however, such rigorous examination of ideas frequently devolves into partisan warfare, as has become all too obvious.

Today, we find ourselves in a position of increasing partisan entrenchment exacerbated by the proliferation of disinformation and the willingness of many to pledge loyalty to influential personalities while permitting factional echo chambers to shape their understanding of reality. We have, in many ways, arrived at a state of wilful incommensurability,²⁰ a condition in which people have little interest in considering alternative perspectives for their worth. Worse, many deliberately go out of their way to ruthlessly find fault with competing opinions, revelling in their capacity to undermine and talk past one another. They embrace a disposition of dismissive intransigence and so end up in a state of polarized alienation.²¹

This toxic climate is likewise nourished by the partisan us-or-them mindset that reaches into all spheres of life, descending “into the merciless invasion of personal privacy, the dissemination of calumny, the exaggeration of mistrust, and the misuse of the news media at the hands of vested interests.”²² It also readily descends into violence. And when it does, leaders often call for unity and a return to civility. But such calls ring hollow when the predominant culture is one of boasting, of backbiting, of backlashing—of perpetual spitefulness and discord. The House of Justice observes, “The reaction of those who attempt to protect themselves against such distortions of the system produces secretiveness, concealment of uncomfortable facts, and reciprocal misuse of the media—in all, a perpetuation of disharmony in the social fabric.”²³

¹⁸ Plato outlined some of the pitfalls of democracy some 2500 years ago. In terms of democracy's epistemic potential, he argues that, fundamentally, democracies do not promote the collective search for truth, because “the people” generally are driven by competing short-term interests and long-standing prejudices, rather than devotion to truth. See Plato's *The Republic*, Book VI.

¹⁹ See Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021); Stephen Friberg, ‘Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action’, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 33.3 (2024), p. 13–44.

²⁰ Smith and Kelly, ‘Public Discourse and Wilful Incommensurability’.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Universal House of Justice, 18 July 2000, to an individual. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718_001/1#556121686 [accessed 25 July 2025]

²³ Ibid.

Karlberg terms this societal condition “normative adversarialism,” which “refers to the assumption that contests are normal and necessary models of social organization.”²⁴ “This assumption,” he notes, “is deeply embedded in the codes of western-liberal cultures”²⁵ and emerges in different yet overlapping arenas. Normative adversarialism underpins the economic realm, the legal realm, the academic realm, and certainly the political realm in which conflict between parties has been normalized as central to the conduct of politics. The result is perpetual, increasing disharmony, with the preeminent goal being party vindication rather than principled deliberation. Rarely (there are exceptions, to be sure) is the party concerned for the whole, let alone for its rivals, let alone for the unvarnished truth. The winner of an election may promise to govern on behalf of everyone, but the logic of partisanship almost inevitably leads to the pursuit of a more self-interested priority: the domination of the party or its leader and, by extension, the recurrent electoral success of its members. Indeed, it is considered a rare act of patriotism for a leader to step aside for the common good.

This condition of normative adversarialism also enfeebls the conscience of the individual party member. Simone Weil argues that a party “is a machine to generate collective passions” and that it is “an organization designed to exert collective pressure upon the minds of all its individual members.”²⁶ She argues that the party provides security for its members, who succumb to its worldview because doing so “is so comfortable! It amounts to having no thoughts at all. Nothing is more comfortable than not having to think.”²⁷ Contrary to the independent investigation of truth, the party member is motivated to cherry-pick, contort, and even fabricate facts in conformity with pre-existing party biases at the expense of rival positions and the rivals themselves. Of diminished concern is understanding a given social reality in all its complexity and devising solutions based on the thoughtful exploration of different perspectives. In this condition, curiosity loses its appeal.²⁸ Granted, a politician’s motivation may be relatively pure and principled. There is nevertheless a powerful compulsion to defer to the partisan agenda. While occasional compromise with the other side is possible, it typically occurs only if the concession ultimately helps to fortify the party machine itself.

The Electoral Process

The culture of partisanship also negatively affects our freedom to vote and the nature of the electoral process more generally. We are often unable to vote for those whom we actually feel are best suited to serve in elected positions. Several interconnected factors contribute to this constraint on our democratic freedom.

²⁴ Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004), p. 38.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Simone Weil, *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, translated by Simon Leys (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), p. 11.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁸ Weil’s critique is borne out by recent research suggesting that, rather than parties changing their platforms to reflect the policy preferences of voters, it is voters who first identify with a party due to pre-existing group loyalties and social identities, and then shape their own views to conform with that of their party. See Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

First, the electorate in the current system “is treated as a mass to be swayed, by rhetoric and various forms of inducement, to support one or other candidate.”²⁹ This situation has become particularly egregious given the enhanced ability of candidates and their devotees to disseminate hyperbole and disinformation over social media and through other means. With such tools now at their disposal, they can manufacture fantasies about reality and mythologies about themselves with increasing impudence.

The electoral process is further corrupted by several additional interconnected factors. Only very few have access to the funds and resources necessary to promote themselves, and only a few of them put themselves forward for election in any case. Parties, interest groups, and funding restrictions invariably limit the choice of candidates, who will tend to represent special interests as much as or more than general ones. Those who stand for election often feel obliged to advance platforms that conform to party ideology, the perceived will of their base, and/or the interests of their funders.

Furthermore, campaigns and the media's coverage of them are frequently suffused with degraded speech designed to over-simplify and magnify the pros and cons of their competing party positions while simultaneously denigrating opposing candidates and exposing their vulnerabilities. In fact, when campaigns begin, each party's immediate inclination is to rush to define opponents and sully their image, coalescing as a party around how to attack them. And if campaigns do not initially find their opponents' Achilles heel, they seek to adjust accordingly, devoting inordinate time, money, and energy (resources that could be spent addressing actual social issues) to strategizing about how to win the fight. To be sure, some draw moral lines stressing the importance of civility, but the rhetoric easily turns vindictive. In place of honest debate on vital issues, the electoral process becomes increasingly overwhelmed by the propagation of spiteful hyperbole, trolling, and contempt.

Ironically, everyone knows this is the case—everyone knows campaigns are not really about truth, much less about learning from one another about the best way to proceed. They know, for example, that candidates get ahead when they are able to deliver the best takedowns during a debate or on social media. Yet, owing to the culture of contest we have adopted, the game is rationalized and thus proceeds, nonetheless.

All told, while campaigns can enthuse and inject fresh energy into a population, given their partisan nature, they also reinforce a sense of disorientation and disillusionment among sizeable numbers of voters, on the one hand, and a rising mob-like recalcitrance, on the other. They help to solidify a culture of cynicism, animosity, and entrenched polarization.

Implications for Freedom

As alluded to above, these problems with partisanship have direct implications for the extent to which we are truly free. Freedom, of course, is a central concern of democratic theory. The Bahá'í Faith similarly espouses its indispensability to any concept of human flourishing. According to the Universal House of Justice, “The idea and the fact of freedom pervade all human concerns in an infinitude of

²⁹ The Universal House of Justice, 18 July 2000, to an individual. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718_001/1#556121686 [accessed 25 July 2025]

notions and modes. Freedom is indeed essential to all expressions of human life.”³⁰ Below, we consider some of the freedoms that are compromised by the logic of partisanship. We then turn our attention to how they might be more effectively realized by transcending this logic.

First, we are not as free as we should be to choose whom to vote for during elections. As discussed above, constraints imposed by partisan agendas as well as the limited pool of candidates presented by the different parties restrict our choices. Because the political landscape is primarily shaped by parties jockeying for pre-eminence, voters have little influence over who appears on the ballot with a realistic chance of election—or over the agendas the candidates pursue once elected.

Second, and related to this constraint on candidate choice, we are not as free as we should be to access legitimate, helpful information. The media landscape is now saturated with a morass of conflicting misinformation and disinformation—much of it malicious—making it extraordinarily difficult to discern what is genuinely factual, sincere, and truthful. Like politicians themselves, media sources regularly seek to position themselves in a marketplace that rewards the capture of readers and viewers, not the representation of truth. While some news outlets are more dispassionate than others, many of us find ourselves gravitating toward information and consuming news that gratifies our preconceived notions, some of which are more bigoted than others, but most—if not all—of which hamper understanding.

Third, this information crisis, in turn, undermines our freedom to think clearly, to reason, and to independently investigate the truth, due to the ever-present buzz of disinformation, propaganda, and the glut of duplicitous speech.³¹ We are relentlessly inundated by the whims of demagogues or cult-like leaders, the rancour and reductionisms of certain online minorities or influencers, and/or the artless acquiescence of the perceived majority. We thus find ourselves lulled into settling for and propagating whatever satiates our respective prejudices or preconceived ideas. Here, Plato’s self-interested *demos* finds its mirror in today’s self-interested political actors and media outlets, each of which competes for the people’s votes and attention.

Compounding these cognitive limitations, we are, fourth, not as free as we should be from *amour-propre*—from succumbing to the pull of conceit, egocentrism, and entitlement. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau contends, this state of being sickens society, creating a condition that has become all the more problematic with the conspicuous rise of consumerism, which, the Universal House of Justice notes, acts “as opium to the human soul.”³² Rousseau argues that *to be* and *to appear* have become “two entirely different things, and from this distinction [arises] ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake.”³³ Many rightly argue that recognition is essential to self-worth and the realization of justice.³⁴ But the distortion of self-recognition into *amour-propre* fuels a me-

³⁰ The Universal House of Justice, 29 December 1988, to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America. <https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/individual-rights-freedoms> [accessed 25 July 2025]

³¹ Lee McIntyre, *On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023).

³² The Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013, to the Bahá'ís of Iran. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/20130302_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part Two*, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 131–188.

³⁴ See, for example, Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

centrism that depletes commitment to the welfare of one's fellow human beings. It thus squelches our potential to realize who we can truly become—to unfold who we truly are.

Beyond these internal constraints, we are, fifth, not as free as we should be to serve according to our consciences—both as individuals and as members of institutions. Leaders in particular often feel bound by the perceived will of the populace—even while they attempt to manipulate it. Frequently, this (distorted) public opinion seeps into the consciences of elected officials, who may then find themselves compromising their moral principles and reshaping their positions in pursuit of winning or retaining political power.

This corruption of individual conscience extends to our collective capacity for deliberation, as we are, sixth, also not as free as we should be to participate meaningfully in discussion and decision-making. Many among us are not genuinely free to explore possibilities together because of the constant partisan appetite to denigrate one another in the pursuit of advancing party agendas. Similarly, we are not as free as we should be to develop solutions that transcend party lines and to implement and test them effectively—to truly solve problems—as decisions are typically second-guessed, criticized, and undermined from the outset. Worse still, in this culture steeped in political conflict, we may even lose the ability to imagine deliberating with one another at all.

These barriers to collective problem-solving create a related constraint. We are, seventh, not as free as we should be to develop our own credibility as individuals and leaders, let alone to establish trust in others as leaders. We habitually remain guarded, wary that our positions or proposals will be undermined, all while stubbornly insisting our opponents' ideas are ill-conceived or otherwise deficient. This defensive posture means we are rarely free to act in unity with our perceived adversaries or to make mutually beneficial progress on addressing pressing social issues.

Finally, owing to these individual and collective limitations, we are, eighth, not as free as we should be to rise above social barriers and flourish—either as individuals or as communities—in harmony with evolving institutions. Instead, our potential is constrained by the deep divisions that characterize contemporary political life. Lacking a shared commitment to truth, the constituents of society are systematically pitted against their own kind: citizen against citizen, group against group, and, on a global scale, state against state. While shared interests can bring about temporary cooperation, conflict remains a constant backdrop that casts doubt on the durability of such unity. In this fractured environment, these constituents are at odds with one another as well, each militating against the others' freedom to blossom as protagonists for the betterment of all. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

...relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large—the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society—reflect the discord that characterizes humanity's turbulent stage of transition. Unwilling to act as interdependent parts of an organic whole, they are locked in a struggle for power which ultimately proves futile.³⁵

This fraught condition is in stark contrast to “the society which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in unnumbered Tablets and talks, depicts—where everyday interactions, as much as the relations of states, are shaped by

³⁵ The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 2012, to the Bahá'ís of the World. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/ridvan-messages/20120421_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

consciousness of the oneness of humankind....”³⁶ As discussed below, in this alternative vision of society, everyone is treated as a protagonist who can participate in generating and disseminating knowledge for the advancement of humankind. The community and institutions, moreover, each playing its essential part, are progressively united with the individual in realizing this overarching objective.

Transcending Partisanship

Given these fundamental constraints on freedom, the question becomes: what alternative approaches might enable genuine participation while preserving democracy's core ideals? Drawing on their community's evolving experience, Bahá'ís are learning to put into place a system that promotes unity and universal participation—a pattern of collective functioning the peoples of the world are invited to explore. In a time of mounting global crises, humanity can surely benefit from alternatives to mainstream political systems that—however noble and foresighted their original development—seem increasingly incapable of responding to our collective needs and legitimate aspirations. The Bahá'í community offers its experience with its distinct system as one such model.³⁷ This “system is based upon the ideals of unity, harmony, justice, diversity, and forbearance in the building of a divinely conceived administrative structure through a process of mutual learning and discovery.”³⁸ Central to its approach is “the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means.”³⁹ The ultimate noble goal is the oneness of humanity, a goal that cannot be achieved through the means of partisan adversarialism.

Bahá'ís, in collaboration with like-minded groups and individuals, consequently strive to manifest this oneness in all their collective endeavours and political affairs. While acknowledging the negative trends and disintegrative forces discussed above—forces that seem to call the very possibility of effective governance into question—they also recognize integrative forces at work in all corners of the globe. Accordingly, they are committed “to a vision of a world that, benefitting from humanity's rich cultural diversity, abides no lines of separation.”⁴⁰ They affirm ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s admonition that “[t]hat which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men is the means

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Central to a Bahá'í conception of knowledge is the right, and duty, of individuals and groups to independently investigate the truth. From this perspective, any learning can only be offered in a spirit of disinterested generosity, in keeping with Bahá'u'lláh's counsel in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* as follows:

Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him.

It will ultimately be up to communities themselves to decide what insights, if any, from the Bahá'í approach to social organization to take up, adopt, or adapt for their own purposes.

³⁸ The Universal House of Justice, 18 July 2000, to an individual. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718_001/1#556121686 [accessed 25 June 2025]

³⁹ The Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013, to the Bahá'ís of Iran. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/20130302_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁴⁰ Ibid.

of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind.”⁴¹

The implications of the oneness of humanity for social organization are, ultimately, beyond the present understanding of Bahá'ís, who see themselves as labouring on the next step of a path that will unfold well into the future. Nevertheless, they believe that what is required is nothing less than “an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.”⁴² While the full scope of this change entails far more than democratic reform, Bahá'ís are assured of their own Faith’s “inclination to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs”⁴³—methods that will be integrated into the overall fabric of a more global and unified society. They also believe that every human being is inherently noble, and that striving to promote oneness at every step along the path to constructing a better world honours this nobility. In contrast, factionalism, with its core us-vs-them mentality, hampers our freedom to associate and to flourish individually and collectively. Thus, any system of politics erected to champion human nobility must eschew the factionalist mindset.

Sanctifying the Electoral Process

The system the Bahá'í community is learning to develop is intended to transcend this division and fragmentation, as is evident in its electoral processes. Not only are partisanship and factionalism rejected, but nomination and campaigning are excluded as well: “The Bahá'í electoral system is entirely free from the power and bargaining of parties and factions, and from the manipulations of vested interests,” and thus “[e]ach voter is free to cast his or her ballot for whomever he or she chooses” amongst the adult members of the community.⁴⁴ When electing their local, regional, national, and international institutions, voters are treated as an active force impelled by the motive to choose individuals best suited to serve on these institutions.⁴⁵ At the same time, “the persons elected are passive in the electoral process (except in their role as voters) and accept election as an obligation to serve the community in response to the wish of the electorate.”⁴⁶ Specifically, they are elected within a system in which the spirit of service is preeminent; they have no interest in seeking power, and without nominations or campaigning, there is, in any event, no means for an individual to pursue it.⁴⁷ Additionally, the voter makes her or his selection in complete confidence, resolutely abstaining from any discussion about the merits or shortcomings of this or that person. The electoral process is thus ideally free of any vestige of personal criticism or backbiting.

⁴¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 225.

⁴² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 43.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁴ The Universal House of Justice, 18 July 2000, to an individual. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718_001/1#556121686 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice states: “In other words, the systems differ in their essential spirit: one is a seeking for power, the other is an acceptance of responsibility for service.”

Certainly, those without experience with the Bahá'í electoral process may reasonably question whether these high ideals can be put into practice. However, the rules prohibiting nominations, campaigning, factions, and personal criticism are not merely procedural features; they reflect deeply rooted norms within the community that are increasingly shaping the culture surrounding elections. For example, while the norm against backbiting may not always be perfectly upheld—especially since Bahá'í communities operate within broader social contexts where criticism of others is often normalized—there remains a shared understanding that a higher standard exists. Combined with the belief that this standard reflects the true nature of each human being and is attainable, this understanding creates a powerful motivating force to transcend such forces of division toward unity and mutual respect.

The freedom to vote in this way is also considered a spiritual privilege and thus implies a number of responsibilities on the part of the elector. Among these is the responsibility to become active in and well-informed about community affairs. Keenly participating in the endeavours of the community enables the elector to learn about, and thus to wisely vote for, those who best exemplify the qualities of leadership suitable for elected service. Preeminent among these qualities are those “of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.”⁴⁸ All other criteria are either secondary, as in the case of diversity of representation—which the voter should take into account after considering the preeminent qualities of those eligible for election—or irrelevant, as in the case of material or social status.⁴⁹

In short, active participation in the affairs of the community combined with “a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body” enables the individual to “properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast.”⁵⁰ In this way, the voter enjoys many freedoms, including the freedom to choose from among all community members of age, freedom from the poison of backbiting, freedom from the limitations of competing reductionisms, and thus the freedom to consult his or her conscience without feeling beholden to any personality or partisan creed. The individual is also free to actively develop her or his organic relationship to the institutions that both serve and govern social life.

Associating and Learning in Action

This organic relationship is fostered through an approach to overcoming the tension between over-centralization and decentralization that has long occupied democratic thought. On this point, thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville⁵¹ worry about the dangers of administrative centralization. In his view, history has tended towards greater and greater concentration of such power, thus threatening the township, which he considers the cradle of democracy because its institutions put self-rule within the

⁴⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 88.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the importance of diversity as a consideration when voting in a Bahá'í election, see Arash Abizadeh, ‘How Bahá'í Voters Should Vote’, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 18.1–4 (2008), p. 77–94.

⁵⁰ The Universal House of Justice, 25 March 2007, to the Bahá'ís of the World. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20070325_001/1 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁵¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, trans. by Gerald E. Bevan, with an introduction and notes by Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

reach of the people. At this level, the people are able to organize, legislate, and deliberate over their common interests. He observes that among the pillars of democracy are civil associations, which also operate at the local scale. These voluntary organizations are where we learn to take initiative and pursue common aims. They are where we advance “the science of association,” which, for him, “is the mother science; the progress of all the people depends on the progress of that one.”⁵² Through joining together in collaborative endeavours, we develop a taste for liberty. Such association is actually at the core of liberty.

In their efforts to associate more effectively, Bahá'ís are learning to weave the active participation of everyone into the pattern of community life. One tool to enhance such participation is a space called the reflection meeting, where community members from a small geographic area, known as a “cluster,” gather on a quarterly basis to consult on the effectiveness of their development activities as well as on adjustments to community goals and strategies. For instance, community members might assess how their educational activities are growing in their area, then adjust their approach based on what they've learned. The Universal House of Justice explains that this space enables “planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground” and enables “those engaged in activities at the cluster level ... to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward.”⁵³ Reflecting on learning and decision-making also takes place within even smaller pockets of activity—in neighbourhoods, networks of families, and other local contexts—which have their own grassroots processes of action and reflection that both nourish and derive nourishment from the learning at the cluster level. This reciprocal flow of learning between these levels of activity, in turn, generates a greater sense of responsibility and ownership among those participating in these settings.⁵⁴

The local institutions play a crucial role in nurturing these spaces and in gleaning key insights from them. To this end, they are strengthening their ability to consult about how to best encourage, guide, and support these activities. They also work to foster a unity in diversity of action and reflection aimed at raising capacity among populations within their areas to take charge of their own spiritual, social, and intellectual development.⁵⁵ Similarly, institutions at all levels—from the local to the international—strive to synthesize the knowledge generated at the grassroots level and disseminate it to other pockets of activity to inform their respective endeavours, thus playing a key role in facilitating the flow of learning across populations.⁵⁶ In so doing, they give impetus to an organic process of

⁵² Cited in Steven B Smith, *Political Philosophy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 211.

⁵³ The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 2010, to the Bahá'ís of the World. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/ridvan-messages/20100421_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁵⁴ The Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015, to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20151229_001/1 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁵⁵ The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 2010, to the Bahá'ís of the World. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/ridvan-messages/20100421_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁵⁶ Todd Smith, ‘Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom’, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 30.1–2 (2020), p. 47–113.

growth in which grassroots experience is contextualized within local, regional, national, and global learning processes all guided by a unifying yet evolving conceptual framework.⁵⁷

Taken together, the community thereby discovers how to strike a vital balance between decentralization and centralization and to blend and harmonize the strengths of both the indirect and direct features of democracy. It thus encourages its members to regularly associate, to meaningfully participate in deliberation and decision making, and to develop solidarity with others.

Finally, Bahá'í consultation is a central component of this learning process that upholds unity over division in the search for truth. It is a deliberative approach that presumes several key principles: that the generation of knowledge is something everyone can and should be empowered to engage in; that insights are provisional and fallible no matter their human source, but that they are also potentially viable and worthy of consideration; that different viewpoints offer different takes on reality, some of which overlap and reinforce one another; and that a major objective is to collectively scrutinize the value of these perspectives, weeding out flawed ones while, wherever possible, correlating and harmonizing beneficial ones. Bahá'u'lláh describes the exalted nature of consultation in the following terms: “The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.”⁵⁸

The approach to knowledge exemplified by consultation extends throughout the entire process of learning in which the Bahá'í community is engaged—a process that encompasses its ongoing efforts to implement and refine its distinctive system of political self-organization. Because partisanship—indeed any kind of factionalism—is both normatively ruled out and actually excluded, the generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge from the local to the global levels do not suffer the injuries they typically do in mainstream political systems. Knowledge is not siloed within worldview-defined bubbles, not hoarded by self-interested actors, not distorted or cherry-picked to be used as a weapon against others, and not supplanted by self-serving fabrications.

Conclusion: Encouraging Universal Participation

Later in his writings, Tocqueville raises the concern of democratic despotism—a warning that resonates powerfully today. He warns of a condition in which we become more pliant, subject to manipulation, and so languish in a state of political adolescence. Speaking in particular of the relatively recent phenomenon of the administrative state, he worries about its tendency towards paternalism, which can lead to docility and apathy, to anomie and alienation—to a state of fragility that “hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which government is the shepherd.”⁵⁹ This form of soft despotism is, for him, ultimately the greatest danger of democracy.

⁵⁷ Michael Karlberg and Todd Smith, ‘A Culture of Learning’, in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. by Robert Stockman (London: Routledge, 2022).

⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, rev. ed (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), p. 168.

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), II.iv.6, p. 663.

He goes on to argue that democracy is historically inevitable but also that we have a say in what it looks like. Thinkers like Calhoun et al. say something similar, arguing that the democratic project is never perfected and that its ideals are never fully realized, but it can undergo continual improvement. They consequently suggest an impermanent solution, which involves unremittingly rethinking and rebuilding the social foundations of democracy while cultivating the requisite virtues and culture.⁶⁰ This is a charge for everyone, a call for an inclusive polity. They state: “In times like these, when the democratic crisis is deepest, the task of democracy’s regeneration cannot be left to legislative actions and executive programs. It will take a movement. The people must awaken.”⁶¹

For Bahá’ís, adopting an approach to learning in action is key to our collective awakening. Fundamental to this process is the conviction that every member of the human family is capable of, and responsible for, helping to bring about the betterment of humankind. The Universal House of Justice explains that the Bahá’í community thus strives to continually widen “the circle of participation”⁶² and welcome “the constructive contributions”⁶³ of all. In fact, Bahá’ís and their fellow learners envision themselves as “treading a common path of service,”⁶⁴ the contours of which are shaped and further refined as collective experience is accrued and analysed and the vision of growth correspondingly evolves. The idea is that in order to generate knowledge that continually “beckons to new horizons”⁶⁵ on the journey to realizing humanity’s oneness in all its potential, conditions need to be created in which everyone feels encouraged and empowered to participate “not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service.”⁶⁶ In this way, a culture develops “which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment.”⁶⁷

From a Bahá’í perspective, “therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.”⁶⁸ Therein lie the freedoms to vote with an untainted conscience, to access relevant information, to reason attentively, to serve according to conscience. Therein lie the freedoms to associate in harmony and

⁶⁰ Calhoun et al., *Degenerations of Democracy*, p. 282–283.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/2011230_001/1 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁶³ The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010, to the Bahá’ís of the World. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/ridvan-messages/20100421_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The Universal House of Justice, 12 December 2011, to All National Spiritual Assemblies. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20111212_001/1 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁶⁶ The Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010, to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20101228_001/20101228_001.pdf?e19067f1 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁶⁷ The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010, to the Bahá’ís of the World. https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/ridvan-messages/20100421_001 [accessed 25 June 2025]

⁶⁸ Ibid.

with purpose, to deliberate productively, to draw inspiration from one another, and to effectively problem solve. Therein, ultimately, lie the freedoms to discover truth, to unfold individual and collective potential, to build society, and thus to flourish as one humanity in all our diversity.

Author Biographies

Todd Smith holds a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto where he focused on developing a consultative epistemology concerning health, illness, and disease. He has since published articles on epistemology, the harmony of science and religion, freedom of speech, and historical consciousness. Todd has worked with a variety of Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavours and has served on both the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada and the Regional Bahá'í Council of Ontario. He was the Coordinator of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre for seven years, and now serves as Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America.

Michael is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Toronto. His research involves putting a Bahá'í framework for governance into dialogue with political philosophy. He is a lawyer by training, having practiced constitutional litigation in Ottawa after clerking at the Supreme Court of Canada. Michael has previously published articles on the relevance of Bahá'í political conceptions and practice for problems in contemporary governance, as well as on a Bahá'í framework for the treatment of animals. Michael resides in Calgary with his wife and two sons, and is the Editor of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.