

Practicing Democracy with Your Money



What factors determine how you earn, spend, invest, and give away your money? The answer reflects your cultural background, your values, your ideals, and even your perspective on democracy. Bringing thoughtful awareness to your relationship with money can lead to a fulfilling life and deepened civic commitment. Here are suggestions for approaching your finances in ways that promote democratic values like equality, freedom, and justice, as well as democratic virtues like fairness, integrity, and consideration of others.

1

Cultivate Financial Literacy

Which core values of American democracy show up in how you spend your money? Making sure that you have basic financial literacy helps you align your values with your personal spending and government spending.

Understanding Personal Spending:

- Develop an income and spending plan, even if the income is only a weekly allowance. Consider including savings and charitable giving as part of your plan.
- Think of what you spend in relation to your overall income. For example, think of the percentage of your income you spend on housing, the percentage you spend on entertainment, the percentage you give to charities, etc. Evaluate if you are spending your money on needs (something you must have, like sufficient food and water, shelter, basic health care) before you are spending it on wants (something you would like to have, like a new car, name-brand clothes, dining at a restaurant).
- When making a purchase, consider the cost of the item and what other item(s) its purchase will keep you from buying. For instance, budget only a certain amount for snacks each month. If you spend the budgeted amount during the first half of the month, you may need to skip snacks during the second half.
- Take the time to comparison shop and make informed choices.
- Keep records of your purchases.
- Learn your lesson when you make a bad spending decision. If you make an impulse decision and later regret it, use it as a reminder to make a budget and stick to it, even if it means delaying a purchase.
- Practice not buying something until you have enough to pay for it in cash.
- Remember that credit is borrowing money from someone and that they charge you for it. Take advantage of free online debt calculators to get a better idea of how interest accrues.
- Remember that money needs to be set aside consistently for your savings to grow over time, and that it may take both investing and time to see substantial growth.

- Use one of the many free or low-cost online resources to make sure that every family member is financially literate, reference sites like:

mint.com/ultimate-resources-for-teaching-kids-about-money

incharge.org/financial-literacy/resources-for-teachers/financial-literacy-for-kids.

Understanding Government Spending:

- Several helpful websites, like usa.gov/budget, explain the government's budget process.
- Pie charts showing the percentages of government spending in key categories are available from several sites, including this one: usgovernmentspending.com/US_fed_spending_pie_chart. Review the chart to see if you agree with the allocation of government resources. Express your opinions to your representatives in Congress and/or your local newspaper.
- When you purchase an item that is taxed, say a prayer of gratitude for your ability to make the purchase. Then add a prayer that government leaders will make wise and responsible use of tax revenues.
- When you pay your taxes, take a moment to be thankful for some of the benefits they bring like freedom of the press, paved roads, public schools and libraries, national parks, and Medicare coverage for elders. Commit to learn about one tax-funded program and the people who benefit from the program. This Tax Day Ritual for individuals and families includes expressions of gratitude and sorrows and a prayer to be said before you submit or mail in your taxes: spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project/features/view/28756/tax-day-ritual.

2

Be Thrifty

As you work on your financial literacy, you may discover that some words that refer to how money is used have gone out of vogue in contemporary America. "Thrift" is one of them. It is associated with hard work, regular savings, and careful stewardship of resources. In *Franklin's Thrift* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/19166/franklins-thrift) David Blankenhorn, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, and Sorchia Brophy-Warren make the connection between thrift and democracy: "Thrift is broadly democratic in its ambition and reach. It aims to create mass prosperity. Toward that end, it seeks to bring new people, often immigrants and the working poor, into its compass and to unite such people in cooperative institutions. Thrift is also democratic in its faith in the power of education. Thrift leaders and institutions have consistently made it a priority to teach children about saving, conserving, and being generous to others." Reflect upon your associations with the word "thrifty." Then identify some ways that you can embrace this broadly democratic virtue in your money practices. Share your ideas with your partner, family, or friends.

3

Practice Socially Responsible Economics

In *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological and Economical Transformation*, Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, a professor of Christian ethics, expresses her view that economic oppression, racism, and gender-based oppression are "inextricably intertwined." It is therefore important to follow God's call to

love neighbor as self in our economic choices. Here are some ways to be socially responsible and promote the common good, equality, and justice for all:

- When it comes to transportation and space, ask yourself if you need a new car or a larger house? What would it mean to spend that money to support those trying to expand public transportation options or local housing projects?
- Invest your money in socially responsible and ethical ways. Here are some of the many investment indexes for companies' environmental, social, and governance practices:

[msci.com/msci-usa-esg-select-index](https://www.msci.com/msci-usa-esg-select-index)

[msci.com/msci-low-carbon-indexes](https://www.msci.com/msci-low-carbon-indexes)

[ftse.com/products/indices/ftse4good](https://www.ftse.com/products/indices/ftse4good)

eu.spindices.com/indices/equity/sp-500-fossil-fuel-free-index

An investment professional should also be able to give you helpful information regarding responsible investing. There are also multiple websites that rate a company's social responsibility, such as:

[goodguide.com](https://www.goodguide.com)

[bcorporation.net](https://www.bcorporation.net)

[smartrecruiters.com/blog/top-20-corporate-social-responsibility-initiatives-of-2018](https://www.smartrecruiters.com/blog/top-20-corporate-social-responsibility-initiatives-of-2018)

- Petition your legislators at the local, state, and national levels to fund programs providing assistance to people suffering due to poverty, an extreme weather event, or an economic downturn resulting in lost jobs and opportunities.
- Support community-organizing campaigns, such as a living-wage campaign or a Jubilee Debt Campaign to cancel debt.
- Buy goods at venues like co-ops and worker-owned businesses.
- Consider using municipality-owned phone or internet services, local or regional banks, and community-supported agriculture and farmers' markets for your needs.

4

Give to Charities

As the needs for government support collide with demands from some politicians to cut government spending, charitable organizations are called upon to provide a safety net for poor and disadvantaged citizens; they are addressing everything from food insecurity to housing shortages to insufficient medical care. When you read the mission statements of many nonprofits, you will see they are committed to such democratic values as equality, freedom, independence, and justice for all. Their programs encourage such democratic virtues as caring, dignity, fairness, respect, and social conscience. An Internet search will yield names and contact information for many charities, and you can read about their programs on their websites. To get into the habit of charitable giving, try one of the simple practices suggested by Rabbi David Cooper in *God Is a Verb* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/767/god-is-a-verb).

- Take one dollar and fold it a few times. Put a paper clip on it and keep it handy in your pocket or purse. The next time you see a stranger who is asking for charity, no matter what he or she looks like, give away this dollar. Try to have a dollar in your pocket all the time to give away.
- Write a check for five or ten dollars, leaving the name black. Put it on your fridge with a magnet so that you will be constantly reminded of it. The next letter or advertisement you see asking for charity, fill in the name and send this check. Try to do this at least once a month.

5

Build a Relationship Economy

Many Americans seem to be buying less and making and sharing more as they establish and grow their communities. Customer reviews of products are more important than ever, making the relationship between the companies and their customers of primary importance. Rather than focusing on transactions, many American businesses are shifting to relationship building with their customers, employees, and other business partners. Some governmental agencies seem to be gaining awareness of their relationships with the public, becoming more transparent with their budgets and other information of public interest.

Use the following prompts to reflect on how you can become more engaged in the relationship economy:

- Who are your neighbors at home and at work? How can you build a sharing economy with them?
- How can you change your spending to reflect your appreciation of having a good relationship with those who provide goods and services?
- If you run a business, how can you focus on building a relationship between the company and customer? How can you have authentic, mutually beneficial conversations with customers about your product or service?

6

Participate in a Co-op

A cooperative (co-op) is a great place to practice democratic values of equality, the common good, and popular sovereignty while also getting to know those in your community. A co-op is an association of people who join to meet a shared need or goal, whether economic or social, through joint-ownership. Co-op members control the direction of business democratically, usually with one vote per member and an elected board of directors. Also, co-ops return their financial gain to their members in some form, such as discounts or refunds. Common types of co-ops include housing or building co-ops, public utility co-ops, agricultural co-ops, co-op banks or credit unions, and retail co-ops (like a food co-op).

A counterbalance to the concentration of wealth and power in government, cooperatives are an example of a way to accumulate common assets. Co-ops offer not only ownership, but also a community with opportunities to belong and to serve. Of course, you also enjoy the use of the co-op's product/service.

Like any democracy, you need to give it some of your time to make a co-op work well. Since co-ops are like mini-democracies, practice your democratic values and virtues by not only joining but also by actively participating in the co-op of your choice.

7

Go Interest-Free

In *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/28589/the-problem-of-wealth), theology professor Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty writes that Islamic financial institutions “do not consider money to be a commodity or capital. Rather, money is understood to be ‘potential capital’ that can only be put into productive use through the labor and services of a human being.”

Islam prohibits charging interest (*riba*) on money loaned. Not only do Islamic banks not charge interest on loans, they only invest in real assets, and they do not invest in drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, weapons or military equipment, or pork.

The Islamic finance system is an equity system in which the creditor and borrower are more like shareholders, sharing both in the benefits and in the losses in accordance with their level of participation in the service or labor performed. Take a moment to consider the merits of this perspective. What do you think of the idea that money isn’t capital until it has been put to productive use by someone? Do you think a lender should be a person who sees that money is used productively? What are the benefits of such a system? Are there any ways you can modify your purchasing to be interest-free?

8

Follow the Money

These days not only do our mailboxes get filled with paid political advertisements, so do our inboxes and newsfeeds. Identifying who funds these advertisements is critically important but not easy to do. The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision designated corporations as persons, allowing corporate political contributions to be designated a form of free speech. This decision resulted in the establishment of hundreds of 501(c)(4) nonprofit organizations through which political action committees, special interests, and corporations can funnel unlimited political donations.

Because there is no donor transparency, these donations are referred to as “dark money,” and dark money is funding smear campaigns in local, state, and national elections. This activity is not limited to one group or position on the political spectrum; Republicans, Democrats, and Independents may all find themselves supported by or attacked by groups with access to dark money. The intention behind an influx of dark money into an election is often to elect candidates who can be pressured into supporting these “anonymous” donors’ agenda; often the donor is a corporation. The documentary *Dark Money* (spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/28643/dark-money) directed by Kimberly Reed reveals the impact of dark money on Republican primary elections in Montana.

Many Americans feel that the aftermath of Citizens United is an erosion of the democratic value of popular sovereignty. With the increasing prevalence of dark money, elections are being

influenced — and thereby the government is being controlled by — corporations. Here are some actions you can take to move the country back in the direction of an electoral system that reflects the democratic value of one person, one vote:

- When you receive a political advertisement, do as much research as you can about the group that funds the advertisement. You may find this website helpful: opensecrets.org.
- Fact check the claims in the advertisement through sites such as factcheck.org, snopes.com, and politifact.com.
- Make the issue of dark money in politics a top priority when you talk with associates or write to your representatives. Participate in grassroots movements that are working to challenge dark money's influence on elections.
- Become a part of efforts to pass electoral system reform laws.
- Vote for candidates who support overturning the Citizens United decision.

9

Bridge the Gap

A Do you identify as a “have” or a “have not”? Are you a part of “the 1%” or “the 99%”? To truly have liberty and justice for all, we must listen to people who have different financial resources than our own. The first step to bridging the gap between you and those in a different income group, whom you perceive as “other” may be to strive to see people as individuals — with their own stories, their own hearts, their own fears, their own longings — rather than to depersonalize them by labeling them or their group.

Consider the next time you see a person who is homeless. Your paths might have crossed before. She might have been your cashier when you ran errands a few months ago, but you didn't notice her. What you didn't know was that her hourly wage was insufficient to cover her living expenses. When she had medical issues that were not completely covered by her insurance, she stopped getting the treatment she needed, which affected her work performance. After not being able to meet her medical and other living expenses, and after being fired for being late or missing hours because of her medical condition, she became homeless. You have investments in the company that did not pay her a living wage.

Or, consider the next time you see a person who you consider to be wealthy. Perhaps what you don't see is that this man is responsible for multiple charitable foundations that help many people in need. He may be single-handedly supporting more people, both directly and indirectly, than you can imagine.

The point is that we don't know what another person's story is until we get to know them. So, assume the best of those people you're tempted to consider “other.” Don't evaluate them based on whether they have money or not. Ask them questions about their likes and loves. Get to know their stories.

You might also try this suggestion from Dr. Mark Brady's *The Wisdom of Listening* (spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/6704):

- Author Christine Longaker suggests seeing the “other” as “another you.” Longaker recommends letting go of the traditional role you assign to this other person and envisioning them as another

you, with the same desires and the same fears. Imagine changing places with this person so that you're in their life with their history and with their present experience — with the same feelings, insecurities, and longings. Then imagine seeing yourself through the other person's eyes and ask yourself: What would I most want from this person? What would I most need from them? Try this with someone you know, such as a boss or an employee; then broaden the exercise to a whole category of people, such as all rich people or all poor people. As you record your experience in a journal or report it to a friend, consider how this kind of spiritual work, putting yourself in another's shoes, supports the democratic value of *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of many — One."

Notes

Lined area for notes, consisting of 21 horizontal lines.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America's democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we've suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

To uphold the democratic values of:				
Common good	Freedom Independence Liberty	<i>E Pluribus Unum</i> , “Out of many — one”	Equality Justice for all Rule of law	Patriotism Popular sovereignty
And to cultivate the democratic virtues of:				
Appreciation Caring Commitment Creativity Empathy Generosity Moderation Pursuit of excellence Service Simplicity Thankfulness	Courage Determination Honesty Humility Nobility Open- mindedness Purposefulness Sacrifice Self-discipline Self-reliance Trustworthiness Truthfulness	Adaptability Cooperation Embracing diversity Integrity Mercy Optimism Peacefulness Searching for transcendence Sincerity	Accountability Awareness Dignity Fairness Honor Initiative Love of learning Perseverance Resilience Respect Steadfastness Strength	Assertiveness Consideration Cultivating wisdom Discernment Idealism Loyalty Responsibility, especially for civic engagement Social conscience
We need spiritual practices of:				
Compassion Gratitude Hope Hospitality Imagination Kindness	Joy Openness Questing Transformation Yearning	Connections Love Peace Teachers Unity	Forgiveness Justice Reverence You Vision	Devotion Faith Listening Meaning Shadow

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.



Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project
3. For more on **consumerism**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/33/consumerism
4. For more on **generosity**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/25/generosity
5. For more on **kindness**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/19/kindness
6. For more on **poverty**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/3/poverty
7. To sign up for an online course on practicing spirituality with money, go to Version 2.0: spiritualityandpractice.com/ecourses/course/view/79/practicing-spirituality-with-money



A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

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For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

