



Focus on Climate Justice and Indigenous Rights

UUA and Shareholder Advocacy



Climate justice advocates, including the Unitarian Universalist Association, scored a major victory this spring when a majority of ExxonMobil shareholders bucked management and voted to ask the oil giant to report what would happen if the world adhered to the Paris Accords.

Climate change, Indigenous rights, executive compensation and transparency in political spending remained at the top of the UUA's shareholder advocacy for 2017.

The Exxon-Mobil vote, a milestone in a 28-year effort by activist investors, was filed by the UUA working with the New York State Common Retirement Fund. It requests the ExxonMobil, the world's largest oil and gas corporation, include address the financial risks it faces in a low carbon economy, through 2040 and beyond.

The surprise vote by 62 percent of ExxonMobil's shareholders asks the company to assess the impact of keeping the increase in global temperatures below 2 percent. The year before, 38 percent of the shareholders supported essentially the same measure.

The breakthrough was a boost for climate justice activists after the Trump Administration announced it was pulling out of the Paris Accords, and was rolling back environmental safeguards put in place over many decades.

Shareholders passed similar resolutions at Occidental Petroleum and PPL, the largest utility in Pennsylvania. Other major U.S. oil conglomerates are resisting similar measures, although major Europe petroleum companies embraced the movement before the Paris Accords were agreed upon by 169 countries, including the United States, on Dec. 12, 2015.

The [ExxonMobil resolution](#) came as New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman expanded his sweeping probe into whether the company misled investors about the impact of climate change.

The [legacy of UUA shareholder activism](#) dates to 1966, when it joined with other faith-based investors to push Eastman Kodak to provide more jobs for African Americans at its Rochester, N.Y. headquarters. A big surge of investor activism took place in the 1970's as Unitarian Universalists and other faith groups led a campaign to pressure corporations not to do business with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The focus these days is very much on climate justice, as the UUA filed shareholder resolutions that would require ExxonMobil, [Chevron](#), [ConocoPhillips](#), and [Xcel Energy](#) to study what would happen to their business models if global temperatures were held below 2 degrees Centigrade.

The UUA also allied with other activist investors in asking the investment firm [Goldman Sachs](#) to examine its policy of funding companies involved in the Dakota Access Pipeline and similar “violations of Indigenous people’s rights.” The pipeline, known as DAPL, is a prime example of the crossover of Indigenous Rights and climate justice. The Standing Rock Sioux contended that the builders of the project did not heed their concerns in routing the pipeline across the Missouri River near the source of their drinking water. The Obama administration was weighing the issue, but the Trump Administration gave it the green light.

Working with the Oneida Tribe and others, the UUA also asked [Marathon Petroleum](#) to review “social and environmental risks, including Indigenous rights risks, in reviewing potential acquisitions.” The proposal at Marathon Petroleum, a 9% owner of the pipeline, received a 35.2% vote.

In a resolution filed with [Wells Fargo](#), which has been accused of abusing clients in several prominent cases, the UUA asked the bank to look at incorporating the sustainability metric of the Code of Ethics Business Conduct into the company's compensation packages. In this, we were joined by Clean Yield Asset Management.

In a resolution filed with [Devon Energy](#), the UUA was seeking greater transparency in its political spending, including so-called "dark money," channeled through trade associations, think tanks and other nonprofit organizations.

In the realm of political spending, the UUA also filed resolutions with the [American International Group \(AIG\)](#), [Cisco Systems](#), [Ford Motor Company](#) and [Occidental Petroleum](#).

The legacy and culture of UUA shareholder activism are rich. We coordinate activities with other religious organizations through the Interfaith Center of Corporate Responsibility, and with other nonprofit groups around the country. Since 2002, we have worked with the New York Comptroller's Office to present petitions representing the city's Employee's Pension Funds. With 1,000 congregations, our members are well situated to attend shareholder meetings around the country.