



PATRICIA KEEFER

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Patricia Keefer is Director of International Affairs at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) where she heads the union's advocacy for human rights and labor rights worldwide.

Keefer has been actively involved in advancing democracy in the US and internationally, U.S. politics and civil rights over the past five decades. She has travelled to more than 80 countries, many on multiple occasions, in every region of the world, promoting democratic governance, public participation in political life and social justice for marginalized populations.

Keefer's aspirations to pursue an unconventional career organizing to make democracy work and social justice advocacy became an early reality when her first step into national politics as the lead organizer for the campaign to lower the voting age resulted in the passage and ratification of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

While in her fourth year of a bachelor's degree in business at the University of Cincinnati, she abandoned her studies to join Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign in Indiana. She was a delegate to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, worked on the minority peace plank, was appointed by DNC Chairman Harold Hughes to the DNC Youth Participation Commission. She left her job in 1969 as a copy editor at the *Cincinnati Enquirer* to run the campaign in Ohio to lower the voting age. Following the campaign, she was recruited to serve as the national coordinator of the Youth Franchise Coalition, a project of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, to lower the voting age through state referenda, constitutional amendment and voting rights legislation. Keefer mobilized strategically targeted demographic state and local campaigns, managed the lobbying on a unique congressional rules fight and coordinated litigation in the U.S. Court of Appeals and the U.S. Supreme Court. This campaign culminated in the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.
<https://tinyurl.com/4hvjbw3>

After 10 years with Common Cause as vice president for field organizing and state accountability programs, and four years with a private political fundraising firm, Keefer accepted an invitation in 1985 from Brian Atwood (former USAID Administrator), then president of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), to join the original staff of the newly formed Institute of seven foreign policy specialists, human rights activists and political organizers.

Keefer's first assignment was to respond to the request from the Northern Ireland civil rights leader John Hume (1998 Nobel Laureate) for an accelerated leadership training in political organizing for youth political leaders with the goal to establish a stable political playing field for negotiations to end the sectarian conflict. The eventual outcome was the Good Friday Agreement signed by all Northern Ireland political parties. Keefer was invited to Oslo where Hume received the Nobel Peace Prize

NDI appointed Keefer Southern Africa regional director for 15 countries who in the post-cold war geo-political theatre were all in some state of political transformation. In 1989 Thabo Mbeki, then head of the ANC's International Affairs Department, personally asked NDI for assistance in preparing for future elections. Keefer collaborated with the ANC's Constitution and Election Commissions on a multi-layered voter education project among rural first-time voters and the most up-to-date resources for political parties participating in the country's first democratic election. She took on a vast array of assignments while heading a bi-partisan team of top U.S. political consultants through the election in 1994. Among many achievements, Keefer designed the South African ballot still used today.

Keefer lived in South Africa for nearly 20 years with her partner, Irish writer Pádraig O'Malley. Together they organized the collection of O'Malley's 10 years of 1500 taped interviews for the *Heart of Hope Collection* at the Nelson Mandela Center for the Study of Memory.

In 2001 Keefer was recruited by the AFT to develop and direct a PEPFAR-funded teacher union program to address the mitigation and treatment of educators affected and infected by HIV/AIDS. It was the largest PEPFAR trade union program in the world and it enrolled nearly a quarter of a million educators and their families who were HIV positive in palliative care and treatment

In 2008 Keefer accepted an appointment from the AFT to join the International Affairs staff in Washington, and in 2010 President Randi Weingarten appointed her director of the department. Keefer has applied her skill as a political organizer and her passion as an advocate for equity and justice to lead the union's international program.

Keefer never returned to complete her undergraduate degree but has been appointed twice to fellowships at the Institute of Politics, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, where she led study groups about money, politics and special interest groups. During the pandemic she applied herself to curating a vast collection of documents, campaign paraphernalia, and photographs associated with the 26th Amendment, and conducted extensive interviews with those who played a role in securing a lower voting age, for a video oral history. Keefer negotiated the contract with Indiana University Library to archive the collection in their Modern Political Papers Collection. Keefer has contributed to several published reports on election processes, accountability in democratic governance and guides to organizing public participation in government.