

GUEST ESSAY

# The One Idea That Could Save American Democracy

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These days, we often hear that democracy is on the ballot. And there’s a truth to that: Winning elections is critical, especially as liberal and progressive forces try to fend off radical right-wing movements. But the democratic crisis that our society faces will not

be solved by voting alone. We need to do more than defeat Donald Trump and his allies — we need to make cultivating solidarity a national priority.

For years, solidarity's strongest associations have been with the left and the labor movement — a term invoked at protests and on picket lines. But its roots are much deeper, and its potential implications far more profound, than we typically assume. Though we rarely speak about it as such, solidarity is a concept as fundamental to democracy as its better-known cousins: equality, freedom and justice. Solidarity is simultaneously a bond that holds society together and a force that propels it forward. After all, when people feel connected, they are more willing to work together, to share resources and to have one another's backs. Solidarity weaves us into a larger and more resilient “we” through the precious and powerful sense that even though we are different, our lives and our fates are connected.

We have both spent years working as organizers and activists. If our experience has taught us anything, it is that a sense of connection and mutualism is rarely spontaneous. It must be nurtured and sustained. Without robust and effective organizations and institutions to cultivate and maintain solidarity, it weakens and democracy falters. We become more atomized and isolated, suspicious and susceptible to misinformation, more disengaged and cynical, and easily pitted against one another.

Democracy's opponents know this. That's why they invest huge amounts of energy and resources to sabotage transformative, democratic solidarity and to nurture exclusionary and reactionary forms of group identity. Enraged at a decade of social movements and the long-overdue revival of organized labor, right-wing strategists and their corporate backers have redoubled their efforts to divide and conquer the American public, inflaming group resentments in order to restore traditional social hierarchies and ensure that plutocrats maintain their hold on wealth and power. In white papers, stump speeches and podcasts, conservative ideologues have laid out their vision for capturing the state and using it as a tool to remake our country in their image.

If we do not prioritize solidarity, this dangerous and anti-democratic project will succeed. Far more than just a slogan or hashtag, solidarity can orient us toward a future worth fighting for, providing the basis of a credible and galvanizing plan for democratic renewal. Instead of the 20th-century ideal of a welfare state, we should try to imagine a solidarity state.

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We urgently need a countervision of what government can and should be, and how public resources and infrastructure can be deployed to foster social connection and repair the social fabric so that democracy can have a chance not just to limp along, but to flourish. Solidarity, here, is both a goal worth reaching toward and the method of building the power to achieve it. It is both means and ends, the forging of social bonds so that we can become strong enough to shift policy together.

Historically, the question of solidarity has been raised during volatile junctures like the one we are living through. Contemporary conceptions of solidarity first took form after the democratic revolutions of the 18th century and over the course of the Industrial Revolution. As kings were deposed and the church's role as a moral authority waned, philosophers and citizens wondered how society could cohere without a monarch or god. What could bind people in a secular, pluralistic age?

The 19th-century thinkers who began seriously contemplating and writing about the idea of solidarity often used the image of the human body, where different parts work in tandem. Most famously, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim put solidarity at the center of his inquiry, arguing that as society increased in complexity, social bonds between people would strengthen, each person playing a specialized role while connected to a larger whole. Solidarity and social cohesion, he argued, would be the natural result of increasing social and economic interdependence. But as Durkheim himself would eventually recognize, the industrial economy that he initially imagined would generate solidarity would actually serve to weaken its fragile ties, fostering what he called anomie, the corrosive hopelessness that accompanied growing inequality.

In the United States, solidarity never achieved the same intellectual cachet as in Europe. Since this nation's founding, the concept has generally been neglected, and the practice actively suppressed and even criminalized. Attempts to forge cross-racial solidarity have met with violent suppression time and again, and labor organizing, effectively outlawed until the New Deal era, still occupies hostile legal ground. Decades of market-friendly policies, promoted by Republicans and Democrats alike, have undermined solidarity in ways both subtle and overt, from encouraging us to see ourselves as individual consumers rather than citizens to fostering individualism and competition over collectivity and cooperation.

As our profit-driven economy has made us more insecure and atomized — and more susceptible to authoritarian appeals — the far right has seized its opportunity. A furious backlash now rises to cut down the shoots of solidarity that sprung up as a result of recent movements pushing for economic, racial, environmental and gender justice. In response, programs that encourage diversity and inclusion are being targeted by billionaire investors, while small acts of solidarity — like helping someone get an abortion or bailing protesters out of jail — have been criminalized.

Awaiting the return of Mr. Trump, the Heritage Foundation has mapped out a plan to remake government and society, using the full power of the state to roll back what it calls “the Great Awakening” and restore a Judeo-Christian, capitalist “culture of life” and “blessedness.” “Woke” has been turned into a pejorative so that the word can be wielded to tarnish and break the solidarity that people have only just begun to experience.

Our vision of a solidarity state offers a pointed rejoinder to this project. Social democrats and socialists have been right to emphasize the need for redistribution and robust public investment in goods and services. We must restructure our economy so that it works for the many and not the few. But unlike conservatives — think, for example, of Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister of Britain who in 1981 said,

“Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul” — liberals and leftists have tended to downplay the role of policy in shaping public sensibilities. This is a mistake.

Laws and social programs not only shape material outcomes; they also shape us, informing public perceptions and preferences, and generating what scholars call policy feedback loops. There is no neutral state to aspire to. Policies can either foster solidarity and help repair the divides that separate us or deepen the fissures.

Today, the American welfare state too often does the latter. As sociologists including Suzanne Mettler and Matthew Desmond have detailed, lower-income people tend to be stigmatized for needing assistance, while more-affluent citizens reap a range of benefits that are comparatively invisible, mainly through tax credits and tax breaks. Both arrangements — the highly visible and stigmatized aid to the poor and the more invisible and socially acceptable aid to the affluent — serve to foster resentment and obscure how we are all dependent on the state in various ways.

Instead of treating citizens as passive and isolated recipients of services delivered from on high, a solidarity state would experiment with creative ways of fostering connection and participation at every opportunity for more Americans. What if we had basic guarantees that were universal rather than means-tested programs that distinguish

between the deserving and undeserving, stigmatizing some and setting groups apart? What if, following the model of a widely admired program in Canada, the government aided groups of private citizens who want to sponsor and subsidize migrants and refugees? What if public schools, post offices, transit systems, parks, public utilities and jobs programs were explicitly designed to facilitate social connection and solidarity in addition to providing essential support and services?

We'll get there only if we take up the challenge of building solidarity from wherever we happen to sit. Both means and end, solidarity can be a source of power, built through the day-to-day work of organizing, and our shared purpose. Solidarity is the essential and too often missing ingredient of today's most important political project: not just saving democracy but creating an egalitarian, multiracial society that can guarantee each of us a dignified life.

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