

Voting for a better life

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The divisions roiling our country can obscure the fact that Americans share a common desire: We all want fairness and opportunity, the keys to securing the American Dream. But right now, that hope for a better life feels out of reach for too many people who are struggling just to get by.

Anxiety abounds over the cost of gas, groceries, rent, healthcare, daycare and all of life's necessities. Ask any farmer or trucker about how surging diesel prices have blown up their budgets, or anyone whose utility bills have soared because of data centers. Across America, people are worried they'll lose their jobs, their healthcare or both. They're fearful about what kind of future lies ahead for their children and grandchildren.

Donald Trump promised to make life easier and less expensive. Not only has he done nothing to fix this, his policies, tariffs and costly wars of choice have made things worse. And leaders in his party have rubber-stamped his reckless actions. As Americans skimp and stress, Trump is on a spree of corruption and graft, cashing in on the presidency to the tune of \$2.2 billion last year alone.

Meanwhile, working people are anxious, angry and even hopeless. But we are not powerless. In the United States, our constitutional democracy is still based on the will of the people, which we express through our votes. When people feel they can't control so many things in their lives, voting is a lever we can pull to make the country work for "we the people" and not just for those at the top.

I saw this on a recent trip to Hungary, where the people rose up in recent elections to break the grip of Viktor Orbán's authoritarianism and corruption. During the campaign, Orbán's challenger (now Hungary's newly elected prime minister) traveled the countryside in a flatbed truck and talked to everyone, not just those he thought would vote for him, to make clear that his fight was their fight—to make Hungary work again for the people, not just the well-connected who prospered from the Orbán regime's corruption. An unprecedented 80 percent of Hungarians turned out to vote, which offers another lesson for Americans in the upcoming elections: Vote in

such large numbers that the election outcome is unmistakable.

I've seen powerful examples of people bridging divisions to work for the common good. In Texas, an unlikely political alliance is emerging, ranging from parents to pastors to disappointed MAGA populists. They're bound by anger that the state's new voucher program will cause public schools to lose \$300 million this year alone and threatens the closure of public schools in rural parts of the state. In Alaska, a bipartisan coalition is working to restore pensions for state and local government employees, to attract and retain workers and provide a secure retirement. And in Ohio, Oregon and elsewhere, AFT healthcare affiliates are working with broad coalitions to fight back against hospital closures and reduction of essential services like cancer care and labor and delivery units.

The most important things we can do between now and Election Day are to vote, vote early where possible, encourage others to vote, and protect the vote. But the election is not the end; it's just the first step in getting the country back on track and making democracy work for working people.

We can elect leaders who will address the crises of costs being too high and wages too low. Leaders who will stabilize Social Security, fix our broken healthcare system and make our immigration system secure and humane. We can elect leaders who will strengthen, not abandon, public education and who will roll

back private school vouchers. Leaders who will stop the weaponization and defunding of higher education. We can vote for leaders who will enact guardrails for artificial intelligence, to protect our safety, privacy, jobs and very existence. Leaders who will restore Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Affordable Care Act credits and student loan relief—programs that were slashed to give even bigger tax cuts to the wealthy and now to pay for another war. Leaders who will act to ensure our water is safe to drink and our air is safe to breathe. We can elect leaders who will demand accountability for corruption and abuse of power and who won't allow tech billionaires to be this generation's robber barons.

The future we want is within reach. It starts with your vote.

But none of this is possible unless we exercise the power of our vote. We can elect people up and down the ballot who not only understand our anxiety about affordability and the American Dream slipping away, but also will take bold action to address it. The future we want is within reach. As in Hungary, it starts with your vote.



Weingarten (fifth from left) in Rochester, Minn., on Oct. 15 with educators, including congressional candidate Jake Johnson, during the AFTvotes bus tour.

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