ESSAY

A NEW TOOL for Staying in Relationship Across Difference in Authoritarian Times

Our driving questions

The global tide of authoritarianism relies on all of us internalizing certain changes – shifts in attention, in our bodies, in our relationships. It trains our nervous systems towards vigilance, suspicion, and contraction from our friends, neighbors and communities. Before laws are rewritten, our bodies and minds are made to fear "outsiders," and to doubt those we once trusted. What breaks first is not policy, but our relations.

There is another tide pushing back against this impulse to circle the wagons: a growing broad cross-sector, cross-ideological pro-democracy front. By necessity, people who would never sit together are coming to the table around shared higher-order democratic goals like preserving rule of law and free speech. Veterans, artists, faith leaders, small business owners, lawyers, labor leaders. For organizers of this 'big tent', this is tricky work that requires us to acknowledge the messiness that comes with working across so many layers of difference— sectoral, ideological, generational, and geographic to name a few.

> How *do we* work together against the assault on civil liberties or executive abuses of power when there isn't always a neat alignment of backgrounds and values?

> How do we cultivate *enough* solidarity to build power across these differences for common democratic goals?

Historical work on solidarity tells us that power is not something individuals possess but something that comes into being when people act together. Our experience with big tent organizing keeps reminding us that building solidarity and staying connected to others against an atmosphere that rewards withdrawal and fragmentation is work that must be practiced again and again on multiple levels.

What is Solidarity Love Languages?

We've woven together insights from behavioral and social science, coalition work, and perspectives and data from in-person facilitation of large, complex convenings of diverse organizing cohorts to develop a concrete offering for facilitators and organizers. A playful and useful tool, Solidarity Love Languages is a way of articulating how solidarity is experienced, enacted, rehearsed, and repaired, and a practice for holding difference. It is a tool for thinking about plurality and power. And plurality *as* power.

Our intuition was that facilitators may need to offer shared vocabularies to help build the solidarity infrastructure of big tent organizing among actors who may have never sat together before and who in many ways speak different languages. Our starting point is *solidarity in difference*, and relationship through interdependence without flattening that difference. Under conditions of threat, people almost always narrow their empathy, retreat into their in-groups, and moralize their differences from others. These tendencies are well-exploited by authoritarian regimes, which amplify fear cues and divisive narratives, straining trust, inciting conflict and fragmenting movements. Like romantic relationships, however, coalitions deepen when people are willing to stay together through discomfort and tough times.

Tools like Solidarity Love Languages can provide language and discussion frameworks to allow people to name the ways they feel best supported by their colleagues; how they feel cared for and how they can remain "together in the struggle." And we know that these ways are likely expressed and delivered differently across sectors and identities. Having a process to discuss this within movements helps us

remain in relationship with one another without expecting sameness, but instead with a commitment to mutual accountability and staying together for the long haul.

How did we create it?

When we bring diverse groups together, we are learning that the way we experience solidarity can be very different for different people – how you express your solidarity may be vastly different from how I do; what you expect as a signal of solidarity might differ from what I'd expect. We set out to study this at large convenings in various parts of the U.S. that gathered a range of pro-democracy organizers including veterans, faith leaders, youth activists, and representatives from both labor and business, among others.

We asked people to name and describe their experiences of solidarity, to explain how they show it, how they receive it, and what acts of solidarity look like and mean to them. We wrote down their descriptions, collected their examples, noted quotations, and observed distinct gestures of solidarity in action. We then categorized them and developed archetypes of the different ways organizers may feel cared for, affirmed, and supported–and the distinct ways they naturally tend to offer support and care for their colleagues.

We've come to understand these as languages of solidarity, and drawing playfully on the now widely popularized (and of course simplified) "love languages" framework for romantic relationships, we've designed a facilitation tool using cards to visually depict these archetypes of solidarity love languages, which give folks from all walks of life a way to communicate to one another, so that they can be better collaborators in the shared work of protecting and building our democracy.

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Big-tent organizing in formations that stretch across ideology, identity, geography, and approaches requires particular attentiveness to how solidarity is *felt* at the interpersonal and group level. Historically, we are reminded that successful movements endure not because they eliminate difference, but because they build practices for holding it. We need more concrete tools to help hold difference, especially under current conditions where uniformity is often expected and trust is fragile. Solidarity

Love Languages is one such tool to help build solidarity as care that is experienced in political relationships. It provides visual and verbal vocabularies for recognizing solidarity when it reaches us in particular ways and when we send it out in particular ways. Our hope is that if we learn to take the risks of articulating these ways, we can begin to invite them, cultivate them, deepen understanding and stay in relationship.

