

The People's Petition

In February 2016, Sean Monahan wrote “[Remembering the Chartists](#)” for *Jacobin*. “Nearly two centuries after the drafting of the People’s Charter,” Monahan observed, “the working-class struggle for democratic self-government remains as urgent as ever.” A geyser’s worth of water has flowed under the bridge since 2016—the biggest deluge being the election of Donald Trump and the systematic undermining of what remains of American democracy. Eight years later, history has repeated itself. The Democratic Party’s presidential nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, failed to head off Trump’s challenge and his campaign of revenge and retribution.

Trump has autocratic ambitions. His plans—invoking the Insurrection Act to deploy the military to crush protests, ordering the Justice Department to investigate his political opponents, and using the Alien Friends Act of 1798 to deport millions of undocumented immigrants—are deeply troubling. The Democrats’ message to combat Trump during this last campaign was clear. Only a vote for Harris and the Democratic Party would ensure that the Constitution is protected, the rule of law is upheld, and the delicate system of checks and balances between the three branches of government is maintained so the sun will rise and the moon will set.

Here’s the rub: Americans’ views of politics and most politicians are overwhelmingly negative, and most people hold both parties and all branches of government in extremely low regard. As a result, the Constitution, once a sacrosanct symbol of American life, is under increasing scrutiny. Recently, *The New York Times* published a detailed [review](#) of UC Berkeley School of Law Dean Erwin Chemerinsky’s latest book, *No Democracy Lasts Forever: How the Constitution Threatens the United States*. Chemerinsky is only the newest observer to call the Constitution an unavoidable obstacle to much-needed change. [David Dayen](#), [Richard Hasen](#), [Bill Maher](#), and others have recently pointed out the Constitution’s counter-majoritarian aspects. Earlier this year, Boston Law Professor Aziz Rana published an [exhaustive history](#) of American constitutional critique, [The Constitutional Bind: How Americans Came to Idolize a Document that Fails Them](#). Longtime critics like [Daniel Lazare](#) and [Thomas Geohagan](#) have continued to steadily chip away at the Constitution’s standing in the meantime.

Certain sections of higher education and legacy media are beginning to reckon with the reality of our undemocratic Constitution. Though marooned for [over a century](#), constitutional critique is slowly returning. The most pressing question is who will *lead* the effort to make America a genuine democracy for the first time in its history. Who better than DSA?

DSA has many important points to make about democracy and the Constitution. In 2021, we published a [political platform](#) that included demands to abolish the Senate and Electoral College through a second constitutional convention. Two years later, YDSA passed the [Winning the Battle For Democracy](#) resolution at its national convention, arguing, “The United States is run by and for the capitalist class, and this class rule takes the specific form of the liberal-constitutional regime outlined in the Constitution.” The resolution asks DSA to “take up a stance of opposition to the Constitution” by “openly indicting it as anti-democratic and oppressive.” Importantly, DSA electeds were encouraged to take “concrete actions to advance the struggle for a democratic republic” and a democratic constitution.

Earlier this year, Cleveland DSA passed the “Winning the Battle for Democracy” [resolution](#) at its annual convention. Soon after, San Diego DSA passed the “For a Democratic Constitution” [resolution](#), explaining that the Constitution stands in the way of achieving any of the goals in the 2021 platform. Finally, the preamble for DSA’s [2024 Program](#) reads, “Our goal is to put workers in charge of the government through a new democratic constitution that establishes civil, political, and democratic rights for all, is based on proportional representation in a single federal legislature, and ends the role of money in politics.”

In the face of Trump’s return to office, DSA must meet the moment and synthesize our existing democratic demands into one coherent six-point plan in addition to our Workers Deserve More program. This People’s Petition would demand that all legislative powers be vested in a unicameral legislature elected by universal and equal suffrage of all adult residents and citizens of the U.S. through a proportional representation system. It would demand the abolition of the presidential veto and the Electoral College, the election of the president by popular vote, public financing for all elections, lowering the minimum voting age to sixteen, and forming a democratically-elected constituent assembly to draft a democratic constitution.

Fully realized, these demands would vastly expand the political power of the working class by creating a system of democratic self-rule. The American people must have the sole power to make the laws, either directly or through democratically elected representatives. The spirit of democratic republicanism has the potential to create a mass political movement by uniting millions of voices under the banner of universal and equal rights. By publishing and circulating the People's Petition, we would continue our country's [rich tradition](#) of [democratic struggle](#), stemming from our nation's founding with the demand for a democratic constitution leading the way.

The Long and Short of Chartism

Our inspiration for suggesting a People's Petition to spearhead the effort to win a democratic constitution comes from many sources, including the legacy of the Chartists, a British mass working-class movement made up of ordinary women and men whose collective demand for democratic reforms inspired generations of socialists.

Chartism began in earnest in 1838 with mass meetings in Birmingham, Glasgow, and Northern England as a reaction to the Reform Act of 1832, which only expanded suffrage to property owners rather than to the property-less proletariat, which made up the vast majority of Britons; the 1833 Factory Act, which did next-to-nothing to regulate working conditions; and the notorious 1834 Poor Law, which was [denounced](#) as “the annihilation of every domestic affection, and the violent and most brutal oppression ever yet practiced among the poor of any country of the world.”

In 1839, a national convention was held in London to facilitate the creation of a petition, [the People's Charter](#), to be presented to Parliament. The charter called for universal and equal suffrage for all male citizens of Great Britain twenty-one and over, equal representation in parliament with three hundred electoral districts with each district containing an equal number of inhabitants, a secret and direct ballot, annual parliamentary elections, payment for members of parliament to allow men of all social classes to hold office, and the removal of property

requirements for parliamentary candidates. In June 1839, this petition, with over 1.3 million signatures, was sent to the House of Commons.

The Commons refused to hear the petition, as was expected. The question attendees discussed at the convention was what to do after the refusal. The middle-class delegates favored a “moral force” strategy that sought to appeal to the reason of skeptical property owners rather than the “physical force” approach favored by the working-class delegates. As the convention continued, those who favored the moral force strategy gradually left. The convention then called on its signatories to employ all means to implement the People’s Charter, including a Grand National Holiday in which all signatories would withhold their labor until the Charter’s demands were met.

The idea of a Grand National Holiday to extract concessions from the British ruling class was one of modern history's first calls for a general strike. Riots and armed uprisings broke out around the country, including the Newport Rising, in which over 20 Chartists were killed, and the leaders of the uprising, John Frost, Zephaniah Williams, and William Jones, were banished to Australia. In 1842, the People’s Charter was presented to Parliament again. It garnered over an astounding three million signatures, and it was again rejected. Already strong in numbers, the Chartist movement was aided by a newly militant trade union movement fueled by an economic depression beginning that same year. Engels, in his book *Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845, described the Chartist movement and its demands with revolutionary phraseology:

Since the working-men do not respect the law, but simply submit to its power when they cannot change it, it is most natural that they should at least propose alterations in it, that they should wish to put a proletarian law in the place of the legal fabric of the bourgeoisie. This proposed law is the People's Charter, which in form is purely political, and demands a democratic basis for the House of Commons. Chartism is the compact form of their opposition to the bourgeoisie. In the Unions and turnouts opposition always remained isolated: it was single working-men or sections who fought a single bourgeois. If the fight became general, this was scarcely by the intention of the working-men; or,

when it did happen intentionally, Chartism was at the bottom of it. But in Chartism it is the whole working-class which arises against the bourgeoisie, and attacks, first of all, the political power, the legislative rampart with which the bourgeoisie has surrounded itself... These six points, which are all limited to the reconstitution of the House of Commons, harmless as they seem, are sufficient to overthrow the whole English Constitution, Queen and Lords included.

As time passed, the movement began to fray, and a series of irreparable blows, including concentrated state violence and well-placed reforms, occurred throughout 1848. The British state was strong and unified, and its army was well-trained and professional. Violence was dished out, reforms succeeded, and revolution was narrowly avoided. These carrot-and-stick tactics ultimately spelled the end of England's most militant and united labor movement and one of the most significant and best-organized political movements of the 19th century.

That same year, several uprisings took place across Europe in the name of democratic republicanism. While they were all defeated, the revolutions of 1848 spread the ideas of liberalism, democracy, and socialism worldwide. Famously, the *Communist Manifesto* was published just moments before the revolution broke out in Germany. In his draft of the *Manifesto*, [Engels explained](#) that the “first and fundamental condition for the introduction of community of property is the political liberation of the proletariat through a democratic constitution.”

Marx and Engels understood that the Chartist movement was revolutionary because it revolved around radically democratic political reforms. It united workers who were otherwise greatly divided in the trades in which they earned their daily bread under the banner of universal and equal political rights for all men. Their collective desire for democratic self-government was the glue that held the movement together.

Marx and Engels identified themselves as Chartists, and in the *Communist Manifesto*, they urged other revolutionaries to do the same. In a country where the working class comprised most of the population, democracy, [Engels explained](#), would mean “the domination of the working class,

neither more nor less.” Democracy—government of the people, by the people, for the people—would make the Workers Deserve Program viable. A modern-day People’s Petition published and circulated by DSA, coupled with our existing Workers Deserve More program, would unite the American working class into a powerful political organization to win a democratic constitution, but only if we have the courage to publish it.

Separate and Unequal

The history of Chartism is relevant to socialists in the United States in the present day because we have a political system based on separate and unequal rights. Take our Senate. As Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt point out in their book [*Tyranny of the Minority*](#), the United States is one of only a handful of countries with a bicameral legislature with a powerful upper chamber and one of an even smaller number of countries in which the upper chamber is severely malapportioned due to the equal representation of unequal states. States representing less than 20 percent of the U.S. population can produce a Senate majority. By 2040, a staggering seventy percent of the U.S. population will be represented by [only 30 senators](#); 70 Senators will only represent thirty percent of the U.S. population.

When combined with malapportionment, the filibuster allows [forty-one senators](#) representing less than 11 percent of the American population to kill any bill. In no other country on Earth, Levitsky and Ziblatt explain, “Do legislative minorities routinely and permanently thwart legislative majorities.” Changing the structure of the Senate by utilizing the ratification process outlined in Article V of the U.S. Constitution is virtually impossible because each state has veto power regarding reapportionment. With this rigidity in mind, it’s unsurprising that law professor Sanford Levison called bicameralism and the Senate the “[hard-wired](#)” parts of the Constitution in his book, [Our Undemocratic Constitution](#).

The denial of universal and equal rights is the cornerstone of American politics. The Electoral College allows a presidential candidate to become president while winning as little as [23 percent of the popular vote](#). A president’s veto can only be overturned by a two-thirds vote of both Houses of Congress, which has only been done [112 times out of nearly 2,600 attempts](#). Federal

judges, including Supreme Court Justices, are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate for life terms. The Supreme Court can strike down any previous law or judicial precedent it wishes whenever it wants. First-past-the-post voting makes it virtually impossible for alternative parties to compete equally with the Democrats and Republicans. Single-member districts are often gerrymandered by one party to gain an unfair electoral advantage over their opponents. These veto points ensure that we will remain a house divided against itself, permanently separate and unequal, until we choose a better path.

Some of our comrades may argue that the demand for a democratic constitution and our call for DSA to publish and circulate a People's Petition will only distract us from winning socialism. [We are familiar](#) with the standard objections to a democratic-republican strategy—that it is reformist, not revolutionary, and aims only to establish a bourgeois republic, not a socialist democracy.

Those skeptics of this proposal must answer several questions. How can we confront the awesome power of capital without confronting a Constitution that protects [private property](#)? How can we pass sweeping policies like Medicare for All when the staunchly conservative Supreme Court's judicial review powers stand unchallenged? We have already seen President Biden and the Democratic Party [fail to pass the bulk of their domestic policy agenda](#) even with full control of the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. What makes us think we could pass more radical reforms under this current system? Labor, elections, climate, healthcare, education, housing, criminal justice, trans rights, foreign policy—DSA members are engaged in many struggles directly related to our undemocratic political structure. The demands in our Workers Deserve More program must be coupled with a critique of our undemocratic constitution and a roadmap toward passing them. The People's Petition will be our roadmap.

The task before us is to make America a democratic republic. Realizing the people's democratic aspirations would represent a seismic shift in the class struggle. As Marx [explained in the *Manifesto*](#), under a democratic constitution, the proletariat would be able to “use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie.”

Democracy as Political Independence

Many debates within DSA revolve around how best to establish political independence from the Democratic Party. Some believe in a “clean-break” strategy that immediately severs ties with the Democrats, including no longer running DSA-endorsed candidates on the party’s ballot line. Others think we should continue to use the Democratic ballot line to gather electoral support and later establish our own party. This approach is known as the “dirty-break” strategy.

We keep talking in circles about this issue because both arguments simply miss the forest for the trees. Establishing an independent political party able to contest state power nationally is almost impossible under our current political system. Taking up the cause of a democratic constitution and publishing the People’s Petition is the best way for DSA to proclaim its political independence. DSA members could run as proponents of the People’s Petition in future elections. Signers of the People’s Petition would become dues-paying members of DSA. Those who are able and willing would be directed to help produce political propaganda and further organize for a democratic constitution. The solution to the question of political independence is for us to first draw a line in the sand between those who support the existing Constitution and those of us who support democracy.

A mass working-class political organization with millions of rank-and-file, dues-paying members will be our future if we publish the People’s Petition and center the demand for a democratic constitution in our organizing. Most working-class Americans are unorganized and pursue no collective political goals. [Almost 90 million eligible voters didn't vote in the last election.](#) Non-voters tend to be young, make less money, be less educated, and hold various opinions. They tend to think that voting has little to do with how decisions are made, traditional politicians and parties don’t care about them, and that the economy is rigged for the benefit of a powerful minority. They possess a sort of “pessimism of the intellect,” to borrow a phrase first used by Romain Rolland and popularized by Antonio Gramsci. They look at the cronyism, the cynicism, and the self-dealing that define much of American politics and want nothing to do with it. Our task is to give those politically disengaged sections of American society the necessary “optimism of the will” to change our political system. Just as Chartism inspired generations of

democratic socialists, the People's Petition will inspire those who believe in establishing a democratic society.

The Democratic Socialists of America will unite around establishing a democratic republic to confront the roadblocks preventing the sovereign will of the American people from being realized. We will center the demand for universal and equal rights in our discussions about building a mass workers' party independent of the Democrats. As we continue to help make a powerful labor movement, we should discuss our political system and explain how democracy will aid the vital task of building up working-class power. Democracy will expand our political and social horizons and make possible what today is impossible. [Thomas Paine reminded us](#), "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Taking his words to heart, let's take up the People's Petition and begin making that new world together.