

OPINION COLUMNS

Local View / There's power in the aisles: Grocery co-ops matter now more than ever

From the column: "In times of political instability and economic inequality, grocery co-ops are both radical and practical solutions. They offer a return on investment in every sense."



A Whole Foods Co-op employee in Duluth hands change to a customer. (2014 News Tribune file photo)

Opinion by Anthony Hernandez

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Grocery cooperatives are contributing to developing vibrant communities — making fresh produce accessible, connecting neighbors, and providing vital programming that enriches communities.

At a time when there's social unrest around weakened public institutions, rising inequality, and growing public distrust — all exacerbated by attacks from the federal government — grocery cooperatives aren't just alternative grocery stores. They are lighthouses of democratic ownership, economic resilience, and community healing. In this political moment of unrest and instability, they are more vital than ever.

As a board member for a grocery co-op and as an attendee of the national Consumer Cooperative Management Association Conference in Duluth at the end of May, I believe it's crucial to recognize the vital role grocery co-ops play in our country.

Co-ops have played a vital role in the history of our nation. The great sociologist W.E.B. DuBois [supported the idea](https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-09750-3.html?srsId=AfmBOoriUk-eGnEiqlNiWdEiZt6Ir3IHovQORQ9WTZGruf9HC8pZCnm_) of the cooperative tradition. He saw co-ops as a part of the strategy for the Black community to build collective economic power and self-sufficiency. Co-ops have historically allowed groups on the margins of society to pool resources and shape their economic futures — principles still very necessary today.

As democratic institutions are weakened, co-ops shine as democratic alternatives.

As our nation's public institutions suffer from disinvestment and political sabotage (e.g. cuts to food programs and privatization efforts under the second administration of President Donald Trump), communities need new forms of civic infrastructure. Their stabilizing influence stands as an economic, political, and social anchor.

Grocery co-ops are [democratically governed](https://farmersmarketlegaltoolkit.org/business-structures/cooperatives/): one member, one vote. Members direct

the mission, support local needs, and ensure transparency, which improves accountability.

Co-ops revive civic trust and local agency, both crucial in an age of disillusionment and systemic abandonment and neglect.

Co-ops are financially sound and offer broad, measurable return on investment. Co-ops can [offer financial dividends](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/patronagedividend.asp) to members; often a substantial percentage of net profits, even 30% to 60%, are returned based on how much members spend. For instance, a \$1,000-a-year shopper could receive \$50 or more back annually. [Membership fees are refundable](https://www.usworker.coop/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Co-op-Clinic-Mini-Guide-Setting-Membership-Fees-EN.pdf), making ownership accessible and low risk. [According to the Cooperative Grocery Network](https://www.grocery.coop/article/healthy-foods-healthy-communities), each \$1,000 spent at a co-op generates \$1,604 in local economic activity (vs. \$1,373 at conventional grocers).

Co-ops additionally [support local farmers and small businesses](https://amiba.net/local-multiplier/), keeping wealth circulating locally. [They offer](https://grocery.coop/article/2024-food-co-op-impact-report) higher wages, better benefits, and more jobs per dollar spent than national chains. Co-ops also [reinvest](https://www.cornucopia.org/2012/08/food-co-ops-turn-social-economic-profits-2/) four to six times more into community initiatives than conventional stores.

When measuring the impacts of co-ops, we must consider more than the financial bottom line, though. We must acknowledge their impact in terms of non-monetary return on investment, including social cohesion, empowerment, resilience, and healing.

Co-ops create an environment of inclusivity that transcends political and racial divisions. They serve as vital community

centers, offering nutrition classes, voting drives, food-justice education, and small business incubating. In neighborhoods abandoned by big chains or poorly served by public services, co-ops can become spaces where dignity, access, and care grow and thrive. They provide underserved communities the opportunity to heal and empower collective decision-making, deepening democratic practice beyond the ballot box.

In times of political instability and economic inequality, grocery co-ops are both radical and practical solutions. They offer a return on investment in every sense: dollars, dignity, and democracy.

As W.E.B. Du Bois envisioned, cooperative ownership is a path to collective liberation and security.

Support your local co-op. Demand policies that protect and fund cooperative development. We cannot wait for broken institutions to save us; we must support our co-ops — one shelf, one share, and one community at a time.

Anthony Hernandez, Ph.D., is a board member for the Willy Street Co-op(<https://www.willystreet.coop/about/co-op-governance/>) in Madison, Wisconsin, who attended the Consumer Cooperative Management Association Conference in Duluth the week of May 29. He wrote this exclusively for the News Tribune.

Anthony Hernandez

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