The LWV Charleston book club met ‘virtually’ on April 16 for a thoughtful discussion about *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone*.

We were familiar with author Heather McGhee from her appearances on cable TV, and agreed that her writing and speaking styles are relatable and persuasive. McGhee, who is the descendant of enslaved Americans, uses compelling real life stories and interviews to help explain why the richest country in the world has nevertheless failed to enact policies to address basic problems of access and inequality. She shows how a history of policies that have perpetuated segregation and inequality in areas including education, healthcare, and income distribution have harmed whites as well as blacks and other minorities.

McGhee sees our national condition as the result of a legacy of racism and the misguided embrace of ‘zero- sum thinking’. That is, the economic principle that we must have winners and losers, and that if one group advances, another must fall back. This thinking had often influenced white voters to vote against their own long-term interests. As a group we noted our own experiences with this phenomenon. One of our members did federal policy analysis related to the predatory lending practices against low-income blacks that ultimately led to the fall of the overall economy; and another had first-hand knowledge of the desegregation politics in the 1970s that harmed public schools across the South. We discussed why states including South Carolina have turned down federal dollars for Medicare expansion programs, denying healthcare coverage to thousands of low-income whites as well as minority recipients.

There is a way forward! McGhee believes that we need to shift our collective mindset to embrace the ‘solidarity dividend’, the benefits that will accrue if we embrace policies that can lift us all. We discussed the difficulties of getting there given our current political and social divide, compounded by the prevalence of misinformation. We noted how the Biden administration is trying to redefine the concept of bipartisanship to signify popular agreement around common economic goals and public health concerns, rather than as a political framework.

It was inevitable that we’d compare *The Sum of Us* to *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, which we’d discussed in an earlier session. We found them both powerful but different: McGhee focuses on policy and solutions, whereas Wilkerson provides a somewhat literary narrative about the problem of ‘caste’ as a persistent and structural element of society.

- submitted by Cara Erickson