
Why I Don't Vote

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	Revision History	
Revision	Fri Aug 10 08:08:18 MDT 2018	AC

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https://americancynic.net/log/2012/11/1/why_i_dont_vote/

Figure 1. Painting of Vermin Supreme by [u/Shitty_Watercolour](#)



1. First Some Reasons I Don't Not Vote

Many libertarians consider voting in political elections to be either a waste of time, a breach of their anti-authoritarian principles, or an act of aggression and otherwise morally unjustifiable. I am a non-voter myself, but my abstention is not primarily motivated by any of those considerations.

I don't think there is anything inherently immoral about voting or elections. Voting is merely a form of communication, a formal (or not-so-formal) registration of an opinion serving to help individuals choose as a group between mutually exclusive options. Whether deciding where to eat or electing a chief executive for your favorite democratic republic, voting is useful. There are reasons democracy works so well in so many settings, and they go beyond simple fairness. Voting, especially in large, heterogeneous groups, is effective at both processing localized information which would have escaped a central decision-maker and at minimizing partiality toward specific individuals or factions. Decentralized decision-making also diffuses authority and its abuses.

Political races for high-profile offices seem to almost always produce candidates to nobody's liking, forcing voters to adopt the lesser evil principle: voting for whichever candidate they think will be the least unfit or do the least damage. (This seems most likely in a two-party winner-take-all system, but I suspect there are enough politicians in the world that the lesser evil principle would easily generalize to a system with a large number of candidates and winners.) Some purists use this phenomena as an argument against voting. "The lesser of evils is still evil," they say, and then absolutely refuse all options. But, assuming the office in question should exist in the first place, the "evil" rhetoric is simply an expression of the relatively strong disfavor voters hold even for the "best," or better, viable candidate. The ranking is ordinal. Supposing again the office in question is necessary, we could shift the rhetorical scales and speak of "the best of two goods." We'd have lost the expression of strong disfavour for both candidates, but the phrase would still be accurate in that it unambiguously refers to the same candidate. In other words, the "evil" in the lesser evil principle is more rhetorical than moral, and so it does not justify purists' moral abstention. It does not follow that because no option is ideal, no choice should be made.

I do not think the widespread frustration with the choice of viable candidates at election time is simply an unfortunate coincidence which happens every election cycle. One hope for democracy in the classical liberal tradition was that it would do away with favoritism and replace the selective edicts of absolute sovereigns with the rule of law. The limited democracy of republicanism goes even further by attempting to constrain the tyranny of majorities. That is, one goal of republicanism is to have a government made up of representatives who are favored by the many generally but not the few (including local majorities) specifically. Given a sufficiently large discrepancy in preferences of voters, then, an electoral process which produces candidates viewed almost universally as “evil” is a feature of liberal republicanism, not a bug. In fact, Madison’s argument in [Federalist No. 10](#) (for example) is that republics should be large (and unlike democracies, can be large) to make it less likely that any local majority should be able to “execute their plans of oppression.” Large republics are also likely to have larger discrepancies in preferences among its electorate.

So I don’t accept the “there are no good choices” complaint as a strong argument against voting. In fact, although Madison obviously imagined more parties existing than the current duopoly which dominates American politics, viable candidates that nobody likes may be a sign that the system is working as expected.

From an anti-authoritarian perspective, which rejects the necessity of far-removed representatives holding inherently-authoritarian positions in the first place, on the other hand, the office itself and therefore almost any candidate seeking it would be viewed as actually evil. A strong libertarian argument against supporting (even merely with a vote) *any* candidate for such an office could be made. Elections thus present most libertarians with at least a moral hesitation: *By voting am I consenting to or endorsing an authoritarian political system? Does it make sense to select a ruler for myself? for my neighbors?*

But also: *If I don't vote, will I be complicit in allowing an even worse outcome than was possible?* This dilemma can and has been answered from libertarian perspective in favour of voting when faced with two competing but unequal evil options. For example, leading up to the 2008 US presidential elections Noam Chomsky argued that “There is nothing immoral about voting for the lesser of two evils. In a powerful system like ours, small changes can lead to big consequences.”¹

The practical motivation behind Chomsky's chaos-theoretic defense of voting is similar to arguments that the use of the ballot, like the weapons placed in the hands of gladiators forced to battle each other, is a form of self-defense.² These defenses of voting admit there is a level of implied coercion in the ballot, but seek to justify that force.

2. It's Ghosts All the Way Down

The flaw in all of the above arguments in favour of voting, and in most of those against it, is that they assume the efficacy of voting reaches further than it does. That's not to say that voting is ineffectual in the sense of the famous aphorism attributed to Emma Goldman, “If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal.” Electoral politics will never bring about the sort of revolutionary changes Goldman wanted to see, granted. But as Chomsky pointed out, the outcome of an election can still have a consequential effect which may be worth caring about.

¹[Wars, Bailouts, and Elections: Noam Chomsky interviewed by David Barsamian](#)

²An analogy first put forward by Lysander Spooner in [No Treason II.1.12](#). I've read many similar hypotheticals meant to justify voting for the lesser evil as a defensive measure, usually involving unlikely choices presented to slaves or some poor individual who is given the choice of abstention or the cataclysmic death of millions.

I also don't mean that voting is a waste of time, even though it is (from a decision-theoretic perspective). Since the chance of any single vote being pivotal in the election is nearly zero, and there are non-zero costs (like the time it takes to register and fill out and mail in a ballot) involved, it is necessary to posit some kind of consumption benefit beyond choosing a winner to explain why so many people turn out to vote. As I explain in this section, I believe at least a large part of that consumption benefit for many people can be explained as the religious-like duties they satisfy by voting. In their article "[Why Vote?](#)," Dubner and Levitt (the *Freakonomics* authors) interpret a Swiss study to suggest that one consumption benefit of voting is the social recognition received just by being seen fulfilling the civic duty of voting. This is reminiscent of the vainly religious who attend church or otherwise flaunt their religiosity for the sake of being seen acting piously.³

What I mean is the more obvious, that voting literally, in a mechanical sense, accomplishes very little: registering a preference with a ballot doesn't actually effect much beyond leaving a mark on a piece of paper (or whatever method is used to record the vote). Even if the process of collecting, interpreting, and counting the ballots is so reliable that voting can be considered to directly determine the outcome of the election, there is still a leap of faith required to get from the announced election results to the acceptance of those results in the minds of the electorate (and the entire body politic). A candidate doesn't receive political power and responsibility from a vote count but from the public behaving as if the winning candidate, instead of somebody else or nobody, has those powers and responsibilities.

Beyond the initial leap of faith required to accept a new (or first, I suppose) representative, political power only

³Two good reviews of the academic literature on this "paradox of (non) voting" are [Feddersen, Timothy J. 2004. "Rational Choice Theory and the Paradox of Not Voting." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18\(1\): 99-112.](#) and [Geys, B. \(2006\). 'Rational' Theories of Voter Turnout: A Review. *Political Studies Review*, 4: 16-35.](#)

continues to exist as long as it is recognized as legitimate in the minds of the faithful. Such reified ideas which an individual encounters as something alien and set above herself as a cause or duty are what [Max Stirner](#) calls “spooks” haunting the mind. The entire electoral process depends on an electorate haunted by such spooks as Civic Duty, Patriotism and allegiance to parties, sacrosanct Democracy, and the like. Politicians do not wield any actual, physical power over the political body. The phantasmal machinery of politics only becomes real through the violence of its possessed subjects which are bound against each other with ghoulish chains-of-command.

The observation that political power comes not from votes but from belief suggests a corollary: that there is no fundamental difference between a democratic government and any other government; to turn Jonathan Swift's normative phrase into a tautology, all governments rule by the consent of the governed.⁴ Of course not everybody is possessed by the morality of the state to recognize its legitimacy or the authority of its agents. While most politicians enjoy the support of a haunted majority, they certainly don't need more than a very small portion of the public to believe in the state to maintain power, and they always need a way to control those whose own morality hasn't been displaced by that of the state.⁵ They need only enough “moral” individuals to act as

⁴David Hume made a similar observation, that all governments are supported by opinion, in his essay “Of The First Principles of Government” (1742): “Nothing appears more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is, therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.”

⁵Stirner, and most people, use the words *moral* and *morality* to denote living according to a haunted conscience, according to the dictates of an external code given by parents, religion, law, etc. In fact that is the exact opposite of morality; it is a counterfeit morality consisting of an alien concept acting as if

soldiers and police and prison guards. Of course the chains-of-command which hold the whole state together are designed to effectively funnel commands from executives and magistrates to police and soldiers, who are so possessed by morality, by duty, that they have convinced (or frightened) themselves to always obey, while dissipating the responsibility of that obedience to nowhere, to the nonexistent conscience of a ghost.

That's what government is: a shared delusion, a ghostlike hierarchy and a whole tangled hierarchy of ghosts in the minds of its subjects. It is a religion, and voting is one of its sacred rites. Those who attribute magic to that ritual, whether they believe it be for good or evil, have bought into the superstition of the state.

3. Why I Don't Vote

On its own, such a Stirnerist deconstruction of voting doesn't decide the question, *Should I vote?* An egoist might acknowledge the spooks, then, owning her ability to vote rather than being owned by any sense of duty, proceed to vote (or not) to further her own interests.

In his essay, "[The Apostasy of the Anarchist Vote](#)," the left libertarian writer Jeremy Weiland uses a similar egoist analysis of voting to argue that it is okay and possibly at times preferable for anarchists to vote. In that essay (directed towards anarchists) Weiland asks a good question:

In the end, it is the behavior, not the myths and abstractions, that matter. So if by voting, you can engage with your neighbors to influence them within this mixed society, or

it were an individual's autonomous conscience. See also my essay, "[Authority or Autonomy](#)"

possibly influence state actors to behave more peaceably, why would you insist on abstaining?

So why do I insist on abstaining? I don't vote because external authorities are less dangerous than the spooks which rule our minds. "[Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.](#)" Political rulers (or at least those who believe in and obey them) kill the body; the religion of Civic Duty kills the soul. I'm not satisfied with a cowardly egoism which allows me to seek my own interests while leaving others to their demons. Such a naive egoism is self-defeating: I cannot be free in an unfree society. "[I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. ... My personal freedom, confirmed by the liberty of all, extends to infinity.](#)"

So I don't vote for exactly the reason Weiland suggests that anarchists might vote: as pedagogical engagement with my neighbors. Weiland concludes that:

The vote is a meaningless, superstitious ritual that masks deeper social issues and sanctions nothing. It does not bolster our argument to agree with statist that elections matter. Instead, we should treat them as what they are: the trivial rites of a false religion.

With which I completely agree, although I hold that the way to engage with a false religion is not to join in its meaningless rituals, but to blaspheme those sacred rites in plain view of its adherents. That, at least, has a chance of capturing their attention and bringing the spooks into the purview of their conscious minds where they can be devoured.

Everywhere is different, of course, but where I live (white, educated, "middle class" America) voting is a normative process which works to condition people to accept the state apparatus and its (sometimes horrific) results. People here are "supposed" to vote, and when they encounter one of their peers who refuses to do so it opens up an opportunity for them to question their acceptance of the status quo.

This individualism with an emphasis on pedagogical outreach is a very Cynical endeavor, and I know of no better place to seek guidance in confronting the ghost of Civic Duty than those ancient philosophers. The Cynics went out of their way to blaspheme with anti-political lifestyles, satire, and theatrical spectacle the sacred rites of the *polis* for the benefit of their audience. As Diogenes said, "Other dogs bite only their enemies, whereas I bite also my friends in order to save them."⁶

Voting is held so sacred by some that mere abstention is enough to scandalize them (and maybe jolt them back to conscious thought). But what might a proper Cynic response to election day myths look like? Here's an anecdote about Diogenes, as recalled by Lucian of Samosata, which might provide some inspiration:

A report that Philip was marching on the town had thrown all Corinth into a bustle; one was furbishing his arms, another wheeling stones, a third patching the wall, a fourth strengthening a battlement, every one making himself useful somehow or other. Diogenes having nothing to do—of course no one thought of giving him a job—was moved by the sight to gird up his philosopher's cloak and begin rolling his tub-dwelling energetically up and down the Craneum; an acquaintance asked, and got, the explanation: "I do not want to be thought the only idler in such a busy multitude; I am rolling my tub to be like the rest."⁷{empty}

Instead of quiet abstention or the usual protest vote campaigns, I'd like to see something similar to Diogenes' take on the civic duty of war preparation: a satirization of the hustle and bustle of the voting ritual. A useless activity to point out the uselessness of the activity everybody else

⁶As reported by Stobaeus, and quoted by [Wikiquote](#).

⁷From [The Way to Write History](#).

is taking so seriously. One idea: when engaged in electoral discussions, earnestly take the position that a vote for anyone but a satirical candidate (à la [Vermin Supreme](#)) is a waste of a vote.

