

In Defense of Not Voting: Frequently Answered Objections



What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

— Jesus probably

If writing changed anything, they'd make it illegal.

— Emma Goldman possibly

1. Introduction

The following is intended to be a brief collection of frequently answered objections to voting abstention in regards to liberal politics (the current version is very American-centric and skewed toward national/presidential elections).

2. Why not vote? What benefit is there to not voting?

I've previously [argued against voting from an egoist perspective](#) (“external authorities are less dangerous than the spooks which rule our minds” blah blah blah). While that wording and philosophy may be somewhat obscure and have only a narrow appeal, I believe the underlying motivation applies broadly to voting absentia more generally.

Liberty is not a political program, anarchy is not some “after the revolution” end state, communism is not a form of government, and the kingdom of heaven is not a place. These ideals are not goals but attitudes, orientations, which in every circumstance can point individuals to their own freedom as confirmed by the freedom of everyone around them. A disciplined refusal to vote may help to produce an attitude of liberty. But a more significant reason for not voting, I think, is simply that those who are already oriented toward liberty tend to be not inclined to participate in the rites offered (or demanded) by the social forces acting counter to that orientation.

This is still fundamentally and unashamedly an individualist and moral defense of not voting. For something that purports to be less moral and more structural, see Joshua Clover's [Voting for the End of the World](#).

3. But what harm does voting do? Just vote *and* organize in other ways.

Regularly choosing between competing factions of the ruling class is going to work to normalize, in whatever small rote way, the wage labour and capitalist waste, social and material inequality, monstrous armaments even during quote peace times, and prisons upon which modern liberal democracies are founded. Voting may be an *indicator* of misaligned priorities, but other than maybe contributing to a reliance on authority and a numbness to that normal violence of prevailing political systems, voting does little harm. It can even be argued, of course (and often is), that if a lesser evil option can be identified and popularized among the electorate, then voting can be an effective harm reduction strategy.

I don't believe that casting a ballot represents any major distraction from more important work. But what is so disappointing to me, on a personal level, about radicals who vote is that it feels like an admission of deep discouragement and resignation. As if every other day of the year radicals pretend as though mutual aid is effective and social transformation is possible, but then on election day, when they come face-to-face with even the most milquetoast/Trump-style

Fascism, they are forced to admit that they don't trust any of their own ideals. And they can't even admit to themselves that they don't believe their own radical rhetoric, so they invent stories of harm reduction to cling to so they don't have to think about why they actually think voting is important. But, again, that is just my own personal interpretation of some voters I've observed.

So vote November 2nd if it seems right to you
Don't vote if you think it just holds us down
Just tell me what we're gonna do on November
3rd
To make sure there's no government left to
elect two years from now

— Pat the Bunny

4. What about local elections and ballot measures?

To reiterate the first two answers, there is nothing magical about voting or not voting. What is important is how you are oriented in your political engagements, and how your political engagements tend to orient you. Participating in government at any level will usually be counter to any orientation toward liberty and equality. But voting or otherwise, remaining completely untangled in the messy social structures as they actually exist is impossible. And at some point you've got to stop worrying about orientating and actually do something where

you are, and it is ultimately your own judgment that must guide you. This is our world to gain, but remember it is your soul to lose. Good luck.

5. So you admit that lesser-evil voting is an effective harm reduction strategy?

It can be, yes, but probably not to the exaggerated degree many voters imagine and not without some drawbacks. Every four years in the USA, leftist intellectuals like Noam Chomsky make the rounds encouraging people in swing states to strategically go against their better instincts and vote for the Democratic candidate (the lesser-evil of the American capitalist parties) because even a small change in those districts may have major impacts on the outcome of the election. (This is a quirk of the American electoral system, but I'm sure similar phenomena appear in other systems.) If you're a radical looking for a justification to vote, Chomsky's approach is probably about the best you will find. But even here, there are two objections that should be noted, one logical and the other on strategic grounds.

The fact that major elections usually have narrow margins is seized upon by voting advocates to drive the point home that "every vote counts." However, the logic of elections vis-à-vis democracy becomes paradoxical here. In cases where there is a clearly popular choice, voting is unnecessary. The lesser-evil argument for voting only applies to close elections. But if the purpose of democratic elections is to prevent a small number of people from making important decisions on behalf of everyone

else, then isn't a democratic system which often produces narrow margins self-defeating? While I was writing this I received a spam email from Twitch.com (yes, the video streaming service where people watch other people play video games) urging me to vote. "Most elections are decided by the slimmest number of votes. Your vote can be the one that tips the scales!" But isn't the whole point of electoral democracy that I, personally, do *not* get to decide for everyone else?

The above is perhaps more of an amusing observation than a defense of not voting, and voting for a lesser-evil is still strategically sound even if the electoral system is logically unsound. But we should be clear that it is a strategy which in essence advocates nonsense out of fear (and that is not a terribly compelling reason to me).

The second objection to lesser-evil voting is that lining up behind your lesser-evil class enemies every election cycle is bad strategy. As a recent pamphlet from an anti-colonial group called Indigenous Action put it, "[If voting is the democratic participation in our own oppression, voting as harm reduction is a politics that keeps us at the mercy of our oppressors.](#)" Back in 2004, Ralph Nader, who is in favor of voting but against lesser-evil voting, correctly described the American left's traditional four-year shift rightward to support the Democrats as "a total loss of nerve":

I mean first of all, they didn't ask anything of Kerry. ... They have in effect put a figurative ring in their nose, and they've said to the Democrats, because the Republicans are so bad,

we collapse and we're going for the least worst. When you don't make any demands, when you engage in unconditional surrender, why should Kerry ever look back at you? Why should he give you the time of day?^[1]

— Ralph Nader

Now, 16+ years later and leftists are still voting for lesser evil candidates, and they are still getting few political concessions from their lesser-evil masters for some reason.

6. Refusing to vote is privileged and uncaring

The argument here is that the stakes of voting are so high—including the availability of food stamps, health insurance, and affordable housing—that anyone who would refuse to vote must be either callused to the needs of the poor or so insulated by privilege that they are unaware of the vital importance or nitty gritty requirements of the welfare state.

This objection is wrong demographically. Surveys consistently find that voters in the United States are more wealthy, more educated, and more white than nonvoters. In [an opinion piece in *The Intercept*](#) summarizing the results of several such surveys of nonvoters, Glen Greenwald concludes that:

Whatever else is true, those who make the

choice to abstain from voting in presidential and midterm elections are overwhelmingly anything but “privileged.” The claim that they are is deliberate disinformation spread by the political and media elite class to suppress the reality of their own systemic failures when it comes to serving the needs of the vast majority of the population and to try to shame, rather than persuade, disaffected people to vote for their candidate.

It is also wrong conceptually. People in liberal democracies don't starve and go without shelter and healthcare because of non-voters. People in liberal democracies starve and go without shelter and healthcare because of the exploitative economic system which serves the very politicians trying to shame you into voting for them by calling you “privileged” for having principles.

Finally, it is an objection almost always made in bad faith by shameless evangelists willing to use both your empathy and other people's misfortune to promote their own causes. It is a Machiavellian argument in favor of voting made by supporters of political parties and systems which produce a society with many millions in precarious and desperate situations which they can then point to as a reason why it is imperative to lend them your support.

7. I understand not voting in other elections, but THIS year it's important!

To a voting advocate, every major election cycle is the most important one in living memory. If you don't vote then the worst fears of all the scientists and priests together will be unleashed on the wretched of this earth and there is nothing that could ever right things again... until, conveniently enough, the next election rolls around.

Of course some political climates **are** more unstable than others. I'm writing this just before the 2020 presidential elections, during a pandemic-fueled recession in the United States when Trump is expected to reject the results of the popular vote and armed contingents of Trump-supporting "patriots" and "western chauvinists" have been taking to the streets to threaten their political rivals. But only an advocate of voting would look upon the violence periodically revealed by electoral crises and find in it a legitimacy that demands participation.

8. You don't vote? Look where that's gotten us! (“If you don't vote, you can't complain!”)

In the United States, the presidential election years bring out the biggest number of voters. 2016 had a decent voter turnout (it was the most important election of our lives, after all): almost 55% of adult Americans cast a ballot for president. That means about 25% of adult Americans voted for President Trump (and about 26% voted instead for Hillary Clinton) that year.^[2] Is the argument that the nearly 115 million adult Americans who did not vote at all are somehow to blame for the 60 million who voted for Trump? Blaming people who **don't** vote for the results of your political system, which you choose to participate in, is just confused logic wrapped around a core of victim blaming.

The refrain that “if you don't vote you can't complain” brings the absurdity of that victim-blaming logic to such a pithy point that the first time I heard it I thought it was supposed to be a joke. (I am sure I have since heard people say it in earnest.) It is fitting that its bizarre logic has been set straight in [a stand-up bit by George Carlin](#):

If you vote, and you elect dishonest, incompetent people, and they get into office and screw everything up, you are responsible for what they have done. You caused the

problem. You voted them in. **You** have no right to complain.

I, on the other hand, who did not vote — who in fact did not even leave the house on Election Day — am in no way responsible for what these politicians have done and have every right to complain as loud as I want about the mess you created that I had nothing to do with.

— George Carlin

9. “I don’t care who you vote for, just vote!”

This level of overt blind fanatical allegiance to civic religion seems less common during highly divisive elections (though I have heard it from one source even in 2020!). But it is implied in some form by all of the “get out the vote” campaigns.

There are two kinds of people who might plead with you to vote in this manner:

1. A liar. Of course most people who want you to vote don’t actually want you to vote for their enemies.
2. A devotee. To many patriots the efficacy or outcome of voting are unimportant, electoral engagement is a virtue in itself and the act of voting one of the highest sacraments in their religion.

Vote if you want to, but please don't take any other voting advice from those kinds of people.

10. So you don't believe in Democracy?

As I have [written](#) elsewhere, if democracy, the “rule of the people,” means anything of substance, then it can't mean mere majoritarianism and instead must refer to a society which, in the words of Kevin Carson, tries to “[maximize the agency of individual people, and their degree of perceived control over the decisions that affect their daily lives.](#)” I'd go farther and say that any worthwhile version of democracy is one guided by something like a Rawlsian difference principle whereby social and economic institutions work “to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.”

However, even a vulgar “majority rule” plutocratic democracy with very little independent choice like America is a starting point, at least. The Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta made this point well toward the beginning of the twentieth century:

For me there is no doubt that the worst of democracies is always preferable, if only from the educational point of view, than the best of dictatorships. Of course democracy, so-called government of the people, is a lie; but the lie always slightly binds the liar and limits the extent of his arbitrary power. Of course the

‘sovereign people’ is a clown of a sovereign, a slave with a papier-maché crown and sceptre.

But to believe oneself free, even when one is not, is always better than to know oneself to be a slave, and to accept slavery as something just and inevitable.

Democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class. But we can still fight it in the name of freedom and equality, unlike those who have replaced it or want to replace it with something worse.

— [Democracy and Anarchy](#)

It may be a suitable starting point, but whether you vote in any given election or not, don’t mistake liberalism’s faux democracy for the real thing.

[1] See [Chomsky and Zinn and a Total Loss of Nerve](#)

[2] Election data from the [United States Election Project](#)