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The Case Against Voting

William Gillis

November 20th, 2018

So we've survived another election cycle and the inevitable surge of libertarian socialists like Chomsky lecturing anarchists about our abstention from voting.

I want to be clear: it is certainly true that the *results* of elections can matter. Unless you're gonna roll the very long odds on a type of accelerationism, a bumbling centrist would be better than literal Hitler. Today, as the republican party lurches to the furthest white nationalist extremes, the "eh the parties are the same" rhetoric no longer cuts it for many. However. Just because the *results* of an election matter, doesn't remotely mean that your individual vote matters.

The odds of your single vote swinging an important election are astronomical. There is no getting around this reality. Elections in representative democracies are all or nothing affairs: either a politician or piece of legislation wins or it doesn't. Up until you can tip the balance one way or another your vote is of no causal consequence on the outcome. A typical election in my home state is settled by voting margins in the hundreds of thousands. Voting with the winning or losing side is inconsequential in such cases.

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Yes, the stakes of the election's *results* may be high for millions, but the odds of influencing the few elections with such stakes are, for most, usually smaller than one in a trillion. You can do far more net good handing out a twenty to a homeless person, caring for those in your life, organizing meaningful alternative infrastructure that directly helps others, or just doing the daily work of sustaining your own mental health.

Voting is thus far more irrational than buying a lottery ticket. At least with the lottery ticket there are plausible utility functions and economic conditions for impoverished people where the one in a billion chance is a good investment. There are exceptions where hyper-tight races with huge stakes are known about in advance, but this is almost never the case and certainly wasn't the case for the vast majority of ballots cast this year.

Your act of voting *doesn't matter*, but the fact that so many leftists think it does reveals deep collectivist irrationalities that DO matter and affect other actually relevant forms of activism and strategy.

The argument for voting is very Kantian: "act so that if everyone acted so..." and "if no literally one voted then voting would matter again" but if literally no one voted the government wouldn't maintain legitimacy. And in any case this is not an actual causality. When you vote you don't magically cause everyone else like you to vote, you are a distinct agent with distinct internal thoughts. Your individual actions have only very weak externalities beyond the direct consequences of your choice/vote. You could very well campaign to influence how others vote by deluding thousands and then not vote yourself since your personal vote would still be irrelevant, indeed I know some sharp-minded liberals who've done precisely this.

Unfortunately the delusional thinking behind voting crops up in leftist inclinations in general. They want to build giant organizations, giant armies, with individuals all acting in low return-on-investment ways, in hopes of aggregate impact. They don't search for opportunities of high impact individual direct action.

second of all, *if* more people thought like us they'd help pluck the remaining low-hanging fruit.

Thus, leftists gravitate towards “you have an obligation to show up for a meaningless protest” type stuff. Sure the demonstration only had a thousand something people milling about in hidden embarrassment, but if it had a hundred thousand then maybe they could storm some building and change something! If you just keep voting, keep attending demonstrations, keep buying lottery tickets, then maybe just maybe...

Democratic thinking seeks to build numbers first and foremost. It considers “having” more people to be the very definition of success. When this lens gets applied to organizing it detaches activism from a direct evaluation of consequences.

We are asked to keep showing up for meetings in an organization in hopes that one day this ritual of civic participation will transmute into potency and positive consequences. But very quickly the participation becomes the end in and of itself. The size of membership becomes the sole metric of success. The feeling of “community” sustained by these rituals becomes our real payoff.

Just as democracy teaches us to defer accomplishing things until after The Election, leftist politics slides into deferring accomplishing things until after The Revolution. The party is to be built up until one big breaking moment where the investment suddenly pans out.

Of course, until that moment, one more person joining doesn't really accomplish anything. And so leftists become obsessed with instituting the same suppression of individual rationality among their members as democratic governments do to their citizens. Participation becomes a moral good in and of itself, acts are policed and rewarded in ways increasingly divorced from their consequences. The rituals are what matter, all talk of goals or efficiency be damned.

Collective action like voting often requires top-down enforcement and/or precommitments and sacrifice of continual individual agency so that you all march lockstep into action.

But anarchists — as opposed to leftists — don't accept giving up personal agency and constant clearheaded evaluations. And we refuse to embrace systems, institutions, or strategies that necessitate that.

Instead we advocate direct action and finding ways of getting the goods without first having to scale up to a giant mass of people. Our projects are generally geared to slope upwards in impact rather than being all or nothings, so that every additional bit of energy or time people invest directly accomplishes something real, like feeding the homeless or arming trans women. Unlike voting — which is channeled through a centralized chokepoint and makes your involvement meaningless until a very specific amount of people are involved — this approach allows someone's involvement to directly pay off in positive consequences. Rather than pouring energy into fighting sweeping universal abortion laws, we can simply build networks of abortion provision that are ungovernable, every new facility or cell a win. This gives individuals getting involved *informed* agency in their participation, in that they know the payout from their investment, and it gives them actual payout every step of the way. In this process our strategies and projects cultivate active engagement every step of the way, rather than perpetuating a culture of passivity and complicity in larger institutions and habits beyond reproach.

Even when we do work towards very distant goals like social transformation, the work that we do ideally moves that transition closer, sooner. We may not yet have sufficient numbers to normalize a new social norm or launch a project, but we hasten the day it will arrive and thus minimize the time people will have to live under the interim state of affairs. In our democracy a ballot measure isn't passed the moment enough names sign a form, even if a measure is put on a ballot years later a whole new election with new acts of voting are required.

But most importantly, in our rejection of the democratic psychology, anarchists open ourselves to being on the lookout for oppor-

tunities of individual action. When agency is correctly grounded back in the individual minds that constitute the only true agents in the world, anarchism restores a personal responsibility often occluded or avoided by democratic thinking. Anarchism demands that we ask at every moment, "what should I do to best liberate all?" It requires constantly reevaluating our model of the world and our personal context within it.

This is why it's almost always anarchists who seize opportunities for high-impact action like hacking corporations, coding tools that will be used by millions, or assassinating dictators. We continually build high impact tools, art, and are the ones happy to go to prison to stop a pogrom affecting hundreds. When it comes to making a huge difference there's a ton of low hanging fruit, as a friend of mine said, "in this broken society there's no excuse for not personally saving thousands."

If democratic thinking is Kantian, a blueprint of habits and rituals to be unthinkingly stuck to regardless of effectiveness, indoctrinating us to operate like a slave with a cop in our head, anarchism is by contrast act consequentialist — demanding active consideration of causes and impact at all moments, and staying open to unique contexts.

There are of course rare situations where a vote has some higher chance of being meaningful. And the stakes can be quite high. Anarchist purity police are not going to arrest you for voting. But such situations are starkly rare and, for most of us in America, living in states and counties solidly one color or another, almost never something we'll see. This is important because countering democratic thinking is critical to turning the tide.

The appeal "yes but if everyone thought the same as you" is meaningless first of all because our individual decision to vote or not has no magical casual impact on others' decisions. At best by objecting to the democratic psychology and irrational arguments we can carve out some cultural space for people to gain more agency and clearheaded evaluations, maybe persuade a few. But