

QUARTZ

There's No Such Thing As A Protest Vote

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We're in the season of protest vote advocacy, with writers of all political stripes making arguments for third-party candidates ([Jill Stein](#), [Gary Johnson](#)), write-in votes ([Bernie Sanders](#), [Rod Silva](#)), or refusing to vote altogether ([#NeverTrump](#), [#BernieOrBust](#).) For all the eloquence and passion and rage in these arguments, however, they suffer from a common flaw: there is no such thing as a protest vote.

The authors of these pieces rarely line up their preferred Presidential voting strategies—third-party, write-in, refusal — with the electoral system as it actually exists. In 2016, that system will offer 130 million or so voters just three options:

- 1. I prefer Donald Trump be president, rather than Hillary Clinton.*
- 2. I prefer Hillary Clinton be president, rather than Donald Trump.*
- 3. Whatever everybody else decides is OK with me.*

That's it. Those are the choices. All strategies other than a preference for Trump over Clinton or vice-versa reduce to Option C.

People who believe in protest votes do so because they confuse sending a message with receiving one. You can send any message you like: "I think Jill Stein should be president" or "I think David Duke should be president" or "I think Park Eunsol should be president."

Similarly, you can send any message you like by not voting. You can say you are sitting out the election because both parties are neo-liberal or because an election without Lyndon LaRouche is a sham or because 9/11 was an inside job. The story you tell yourself about your political commitments are yours to construct.

But it doesn't matter what message you think you are sending, because no one will receive it. No one is listening. The system is set up so that every choice other than "R" or "D" boils down to "I defer to the judgement of my fellow citizens." It's easy to argue that our system shouldn't work like that. It's impossible to argue it doesn't work like that.

This is frustrating, of course, but that's how our presidential elections are set up. Democracies alternate the coalition in power, but different systems do so in different ways. In multi-party systems, voters get the satisfaction of voting for smaller, ideologically purer factions — environmental parties, anti-immigrant parties, and so on. The impure compromises come when those factions are forced to form coalitions large enough to govern. The inevitable tradeoffs are part of the governing process, not the electoral process.

In America, by contrast, the coalitions are the parties. Our system also produces alternation of power, and requires compromises among competing interests, but those compromises happen within long-standing caucuses; issues come and go, but the two parties remain. This forces the citizens themselves to get involved in the disappointing tradeoffs, rather than learning about them after the fact. No one gets what they want in a democracy; two-party systems simply rub voters' noses in that fact.

People who plan to throw away their vote on Option C usually argue that their imagined protest won't be futile, by offering one of three theories of change: their protest will work as a boycott, or as a defection, or as a step to third-party victory.

The first theory of change, the boycott, assumes that if people simply refuse to vote, it will threaten the establishment with loss of legitimacy. This will in turn cause that establishment to become more responsive to the demands of the boycotters.

Boycotts can work in countries where voting is mandatory, because not voting can be an act of civil disobedience. In the United States, however, voting is not and has never been required. (Our elites have always preferred minimal participation, and laziness is a cheaper tool than suppression.) In presidential elections, non-voters always outnumber voters who choose the winning candidate. With that much passive non-participation, active non-participation gets lost. The second theory of change is defection, where voters believe they can force a loss on either the Democrats or the Republicans, and thus make that party adopt their preferred policies, rather than face another such loss in the future.

Damage from defection has sometimes happened, as with James Weaver taking votes from Benjamin Harrison in 1892, but the two most widely-discussed recent cases—Ross Perot taking votes from George H.W. Bush in 1992 and Ralph Nader from Al Gore in 2000—are not clear cut. In Perot's case, he drew votes from Clinton and Bush; in Nader's case, it's not obvious how many of his voters would otherwise have stayed home.

Furthermore, even in rare cases where there was the damage, the losing parties did not heed the defecting voters: the Republicans did not become notably friendlier to urban workers after Weaver, nor did the Democrats become more notably anti-corporate from the perceived threat of Nader.

The third theory of change from protest voting is the obvious one: outright victory. This has never happened. Third-party candidates come in third, for the obvious reason.

In two centuries of American politics, only 54 such candidates have ever received over one vote in a hundred. None won, and the only second place loss, Teddy Roosevelt, had already been

President twice, before he ran as an outsider against his hand-picked successor, William Taft. He failed at the election, but succeeded in splitting the Republican vote so badly a Democrat became President for the first time in twenty years.

It's clear why third-party candidates want votes, but it's not clear why voters would want third parties. The Green Party, for example, hasn't elected so much as a member of Congress, much less fielded a credible Presidential candidate, and their organization does no actual environmental work. Greenpeace helps the environment more in any given week than the Green Party has in its entire existence, a problem common to third parties generally. If you're a Libertarian, you're better off donating to Cato than voting for Gary Johnson. If you're a paleoconservative, you're better off donating to the Rockford Institute than voting for Darrell Castle.

This is the legacy of protest votes: None of the proposed theories of change change anything. Boycotts don't work, since non-voting is a normal case. Defection elects the greater of two evils from the voter's point of view—and that's if it works—while doing little to the parties. And victory never happens; not one third-party candidate has ever won, or come close. Advocates of wasted votes don't bring up this record of universal failure, because their votes aren't about changing political results. They're about salving wounded pride.

Throwing away your vote on a message no one will hear, and which will change no outcome, is sometimes presented as “voting your conscience,” but that's got it exactly backwards; your conscience is what keeps you from doing things that feel good to you but hurt other people. Citizens who vote for third-party candidates, write-in candidates, or nobody aren't voting their conscience, they are voting their ego, unable to accept that a system they find personally disheartening actually applies to them.

The people advocating protest votes believe they deserve a choice that aligns closely with their political preferences. With 130 million voters, hundreds of issues, and just two candidates, this idea doesn't even make mathematical sense, much less political sense. No matter who you are, voting isn't about you. You are not promised a candidate you love, or even like, because no one is guaranteed that. Presidential voting is an exercise in distinguishing the lesser of two evils. Making that choice is all that's asked of us, and all that's on offer.

Picking the lesser of two evils is an easy choice to dislike (who likes it?) but when a winning candidate has to appeal to 65 million or so citizens with diverse interests, that's a forced move for most voters most of the time. People who choose Option C aren't being purer about their political choices—they've abandoned politics altogether. (The strategy of voting third-party in safely red or blue states just makes this explicit; those voters only indulge their fantasy that their vote will make a difference if they're guaranteed it won't.)

None of this creates an obligation to vote, or to vote for one of the two viable candidates. It is, famously, a free country, and you can vote for anyone you like, or for no one. But if you do, don't kid yourself—and certainly don't try to kid anyone else—that you are creating some kind of positive political change. Noisily opting out as a way of demonstrating your pique is an

understandable human act. It's just not a political act. It's an elaborate way of making the rest of us do the work of deciding.