



[Pre-Election Meditation from The Dangerous Servant](#)

BY

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I don't like to make political endorsements and, on principle, I certainly don't discuss my vote before an election (the protection a secret ballot offers me from harassment and intimidation only works if I keep my preference a secret). I was stunned to read in an email yesterday, "I had no idea high-information, intelligent undecided voters even existed!" You know, as if the choice between an underwhelming incumbent president, an underwhelming challenger, a list of names with no mathematical chance to win, and not voting at all is an easy one to make. If your only goal is to beat the incumbent, then your decision is easier than mine. I, however, don't only want to beat the incumbent; I want to elect a president worthy of the exercise of one of my most sacred rights, the right to vote.

I have voted for a lot of Republicans in my life, going back to my first election in 1998. I have also voted for some Democrats. I grew up in a conservative, religious, southern home at a time when Rush Limbaugh became a national political institution. I thankfully also had enough education in the classical liberal tradition that I know it's okay to not live and die by labels, and that policy outcomes are a lot more important than whether (R) or (D) follows someone's name on a television chyron. And after 2008, I decided I was done being a partisan activist for the Republican Party. I was growing tired of overseas wars, a Bush-era deficit

spending binge, including an entitlement expansion, and a culturally conservative movement who tirelessly offended my sensibilities on a number of issues. That hasn't, of course, stopped me from bashing Democrats — that's often still my first instinct, but as any conservative activist with whom I've been acquainted in the last few years can tell you, I'm not the Republican Party's best friend. (Besides, the Democrats have held nearly all the power in Congress since 2006, and despite losing the House during the Tea Party wave election in 2010, they still held the Senate and had the White House.)

I am not enthusiastic about a Mitt Romney presidency. The Republican Party is plagued by thinking that says the rank-and-file must nominate whoever is next in line, as opposed to whoever is the best candidate. Mitt Romney carries a tremendous amount of baggage — flip-flopping on issues, [Romneycare](#), Mormonism (not an issue for me personally, especially when viewed in light of the ways his father [George Romney rebuked the church and marched for civil rights for African-Americans](#), but certainly the basis for political whisper campaigns), his stances on [the role of government on the Internet](#), etc. I thought Mitt Romney's selection of Paul Ryan as his running mate was about the most exciting moment of the campaign for me — sadly, both Romney and Ryan subsequently ran away from everything I liked about Paul Ryan, particularly his plans to reform the federal budget (which also had [its own set of issues](#)).

But Romney won the nomination because he was next in line — he has been campaigning since 2006, and spent PAC funding very wisely down ballot in 2008 and 2010 to solidify his support centers in the states. I have always believed that former two-time New Mexico governor Gary Johnson was the best candidate for the Republican nomination — someone who has baggage, too, but who hasn't changed his opinion on issues, and who walks the small government talk so well that he personally vetoed over 800 bills when he was a governor. It's no surprise either, given my strong libertarian leanings, that virtually every “match yourself to the candidate” quiz I have taken online this cycle has paired me with Gary Johnson. My personal views match Johnson's public views with an over 90% consistency rate, from immigration to the budget to national security. Every conservative or Republican argument I have read for a libertarian vote for Mitt Romney can be summed up in one sentence: “Barack Obama sucks, and Mitt Romney gives us a chance to stop the bleeding.”

Libertarian arguments and endorsements I have read are unhelpfully all over the map. My [United Liberty](#) colleagues overwhelmingly plan to vote for Gary Johnson. The staff at *Reason Magazine* are [split between voting for Johnson and not voting at all](#). Libertarian intellectuals to whose opinions I give great weight — like [Richard Epstein](#) and [Brad Smith](#) — have essentially endorsed Mitt Romney, Smith more enthusiastically than Epstein (observation: they are both lawyers, and Ted Frank makes a good case at Point of Law that [Romney would select the most pro-liberty Supreme Court justices](#) — [see also The Volokh Conspiracy on this train of thought](#) — I just think it's unlikely that any of the current justices would retire or die during the next four years). I wish I could hear arguments from some of my former Cato Institute

colleagues, though I think I have a pretty good idea what [Gene Healy](#), [Michael Cannon](#), and [David Boaz](#), to name a few, would tell me.

So where does that leave someone like me?

How I vote — or if I vote — depends on one of three things:

- If I simply want to defeat Barack Obama, I should vote for Mitt Romney.
- If I want to vote my conscience, I should vote for Gary Johnson, but [I should also expect to lose](#).
- If I want to do what's rational, [I should stay home and not vote at all](#).

Neither of the first two paths are compatible with the third. Worse, I cannot, as I stated at the beginning, vote to toss out the incumbent *and* get who I think is most worthy of my vote, so the first isn't compatible with the second.

I guess I need to decide in the next 24 hours or so which of the three goals — doing what'll defeat the president, what'll reflect my preferences, or what's rational — is most important to me. That's not as easy a task as a casual observer might think.