



## Voting? Don't bother

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It's important to begin with a simple (if infuriating) fact: your vote doesn't matter. Even if you live in a swing state, optimistically, you "have a 1-in-10 million chance of deciding the presidential election," a fact that, on its own, ought to suffice to make a reasonable person sit out the voting ritual.

But as it turns out, there are many excellent reasons not to vote — or, at the very least, why not voting is a perfectly acceptable option. In his book, "Why It's OK to Ignore Politics," philosopher Christopher Freiman offers compelling arguments against political participation, not least of which is the claim that citizens are insufficiently self-skeptical of their political commitments.

We've long known that voter ignorance is a deep and pervasive problem, with voters unable to answer simple questions not only about high-profile public policy issues but also about "the fundamental structure of government." And if most voters are just plain ignorant, then the most partisan among us — more interested in politics and in consuming information about it — are naturally the most unable to process information in an objective, unbiased way.

Their process of reasoning (if indeed we can regard it as reasoning) is motivated by their partisan commitments, which leads them to work backward to make new information fit with the already-formed conclusions of their home team. People reconcile world events to their political priors, their critical capacities handicapped by "a selective pattern of learning in which partisans have higher levels of knowledge for facts that confirm their world view and lower levels of knowledge for facts that challenge them."

This kind of selective learning is especially easy today when we can almost effortlessly curate just the kinds of information that affirm our preexisting beliefs and give us the easy emotional and psychological reward of feeling right — and self-righteous. Both the red team and the blue team engage in this kind of self-deception. A team of social psychology researchers concluded that conservatives and liberals are equally guilty in a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies on motivated reason and political bias, their thinking equally impaired by robust tribalism.

Existing political alignments are much more about a human evolutionary history that "that favor[s] loyalty signals and tribal biases" than they are about political theory, philosophy, scientific inquiry, or ideas more generally. This fact explains how the members of the two partisan sides can accept, apparently without almost any meaningful scrutiny, the strange and seemingly random collections of positions their teams have adopted.

As Freiman observes, these positions are often clustered together in ways that make no real sense from a moral or empirical perspective, ways that seem arbitrary. It furthermore explains both

sides' readiness to switch their substantive positions based on the relative positions of the other team, or which team happens to hold power at the moment, or a host of other social and cultural factors that have nothing to do with any identifiable philosophical principle.

Given the futility of voting and the time investment necessary to gather anything close to the information necessary to make one an appropriately informed voter, one capable of casting what we might call a good or justifiable vote, the opportunity cost seems prohibitively high. At the very least, it is far from clear that we have a compelling moral duty to care about politics or to vote. Many libertarians and anarchists have gone so far as to argue that voting is immoral, that the moral duty is to abstain from politics altogether.

Indeed, Freiman adopts this position in the conclusion of his book, making a case grounded in what's commonly called effective altruism by arguing that if, for example, you're planning to donate an hour of your day to making the world a better place, then you have created for yourself a condition obligation (after all, you needn't donate that time at all) to put that hour to the best possible use. And this moral obligation virtually always rules out political participation, favoring actions that demonstrably do more good. While Freiman is a utilitarian, one needn't accept his utilitarianism to see the logic in this position: "other things being equal, why wouldn't you act that does substantially more good?"

Presented with these basic facts, cynicism about practical politics no longer seems like cynicism at all, but like basic common sense. Quite contrary to the "vote or die" propaganda with which we're bombarded from every angle, staying home on Election Day — or doing something more socially beneficial with that time — is a powerful, principled, and legitimate statement. And as philosopher Jason Brennan observes, spending Election Day at work and donating what you make to an effective charity would mean doing "thousands of times more good than any voter," albeit in a much less preening and self-congratulatory way.

If we started with a simple truth, then we conclude with a simple lesson: instead of voting, do something better with your time, which makes a real difference. If you want to help people, rather than signaling meaninglessly to your own tribe, then engage in the truly revolutionary act of actually helping people by donating your time or money.

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