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Why I'm not Voting (for President)

Abstract

"Choosing not to vote is not (necessarily) failing to engage the political system, and, while I hope I don't feel compelled to do it again in the future, I am confident in my decision not to vote for a candidate for president this coming election."

Posting about reasons for not voting in this year's presidential election from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/why-im-not-voting-for-president/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Why I'm not Voting (for President)

 [all in allthings.org/why-im-not-voting-for-president/](http://allthings.org/why-im-not-voting-for-president/)

Donald Roth

November 2,
2016

On November 8, I don't plan to vote for president. There, I've said it. And worse still, it's not the first time that I've made this decision. If you feel the need to go [fetch your pitchfork](#), go ahead, but while you're sharpening it, hear me out. My reasons for reaching this decision may be different than others, but – after stalking my Facebook page – our esteemed managing editor has asked me to share my particular reasoning with the community, so here goes. Maybe I can both place my head on the chopping block and also draw it back again in 1000 words or less.

What is a Vote?

If I'm not voting for president this year, then the first thing I'll need to explain is exactly what it is that I'm not doing. First, and most literally, a presidential vote is one voice among millions which helps to apportion the electoral college voters who actually elect the president. That is, none of us is actually directly electing the president. So, what are we doing? Kevin DeYoung published a [nice post](#) over on the Gospel Coalition's website which explains the second, and more important, function of our votes: they speak to what we see as the greatest achievable "good." By this explanation, DeYoung means something more than choosing the lesser of two evils; however, a "good" candidate is not "good" in the absolute sense, but instead "good" in the political sense. That is, a "good" candidate is characterized by the compromise that makes democracy function.

So if a vote reflects a certain sense of compromise, then my decision in this case reflects my unwillingness to accept either of the primary bargains offered to me.

I believe that all power is delegated from Christ, who has been vested with all authority on heaven and earth. He has charged government with certain tasks, and any government is ultimately answerable for how it carries out those tasks. More importantly, it is the institution that carries Christ's delegated authority, not the individuals who run that institution. In my understanding, human flourishing is enabled by governmental awareness of the limitations of its power and by individuals who are conscious that their authority is rooted in the offices they hold, not vested in their persons.

In this election, both Clinton and Trump have shown themselves to consider power a matter of person, not office, by the way that they have abused the authority they have been entrusted with, and I refuse to take any positive steps to give either of them what they desire. I can submit to the governance of either, but I cannot abide saying that I voted for it.¹

What is Wrong?

Perhaps you share my disgust with the principal candidates. Still, you may be asking, why shouldn't I vote for a third party candidate instead? As a moderate conservative, I have no interest in Jill Stein, and the most reasonable path to the presidency for Evan McMullin is [not about my vote](#). A more interesting case is Gary Johnson – the second choice of many conservatives – but I'm decidedly not a libertarian, since I think that libertarianism too often plays to the same societal problems that its liberal rivals foster.

This separation of extremes is essentially the argument that National Review editor Yuval Levin makes in his recent

book, *The Fractured Republic*. Levin diagnoses the problems that we face as a loss of the middle institutions of society.² The Millennial generation is, on the whole, [more suspicious of institutions](#) than any other generation. After all, for those on the Left, these middle institutions are insulators of the status quo, entrenching racism and other discrimination away from the reach of federal civil rights laws for decades. From the Right, many have bought into a dogged individualism that rejects any infringement on the personal prerogative.

As Levin points out, though, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The Left pushes to limit middle institutions through a consolidation of centralized power, while the libertarian Right rejects these same institutions for the way they constrain the individual. Instead, what society needs is a devolution of centralized power and a reinvigoration of these institutions that play such a vital role in instilling civic virtues and [improving political engagement](#). Since the Libertarian party doesn't embody this perspective on society, they haven't earned my vote either.

What is Political Engagement?

But if I'm not voting for president, am I becoming passive in the political process? I could plead an exception based on the fact that I'm still voting for other offices, but I'd like to defend the validity of choosing to sit out the whole affair as well. So long as the decision is born of protest, not apathy, choosing not to vote is not rejecting political engagement, regardless of what society seems to insist.

This justification rests on the fact that politics is much more than how we vote. In fact, I'm not even sure that voting is the primary avenue of effecting political change, even though it clearly plays a role. There are whole levels of government that are almost entirely insulated from the democratic process. Whether we're talking about the legal system or the administrative state, most of the people employed by the government enjoy some form of civil service or other job protection, and it makes a difference. Why is it that President Obama hasn't closed Guantanamo Bay, [despite making this a key political promise](#) since early in his first presidential campaign? Michael Glennon, an international law professor at Tufts University, explains this specific issue at length in his book, [National Security and Double Government](#), but the gist is that presidents, by necessity, have to defer to agency experts who are often insulated from political pressures, resulting in a remarkable continuity of policy in many areas regardless of the party affiliation of the sitting president.

So how do we really engage in politics if resistance to change is the nature of the political system? For one, we can be deeply engaged in our local schools, churches, and community organizations while taking a more active interest in local politics, where we can have a more significant democratic impact. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we need more Christians to consider entering the public service and working to effect change from within the political system in administrative agencies and political offices. When I lived in Washington D.C., I was amazed by how much of the grunt work of government was done by people under the age of 30, and this work was not lacking in policy impact. That's part of the reason I decided to come to teach at the college level. Choosing not to vote is not (necessarily) failing to engage the political system, and, while I hope I don't feel compelled to do it again in the future, I am confident in my decision not to vote for a candidate for president this coming election.

Footnotes

1. Trump, who represents the party that I usually prefer, is arguably much worse on this count than Clinton, but Clinton's handling of her email scandal, along with things like [Whitewater](#) and [her handling](#) of claims that her husband had sexually assaulted several women, show that she holds a similar perspective to Trump regarding the nature of power and the accountability of those who hold that power. ←
2. Middle institutions are all of those organizations that exercise power over individuals at a level between the

individual and the highest level of government, for example, churches, schools, businesses, families, and civic organizations. ↩