

What is Non-Voting?

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Non-voting is, it seems, one of the most misunderstood tactics in politics. Simply stated, *non-voting is a non-political strategy* employed by various radical libertarians and anarchists who wish to promote a free society yet who view voting to be either unethical or impractical.

Strategic Non-voters

Some non-voters claim that voting does not make any positive difference. Anarcho-communist Emma Goldman, for example, allegedly observed that “If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal.” But non-voting ought not to be confused with *apathy*.*

Those who advocate non-voting typically hope to see mass segments of the populace uniting in *refusal* to vote, on the grounds that such a mass movement will show clear discontent with the Establishment. Thus, for *strategic non-voters*, non-voting is *more* practical than voting.

Strategic non-voters also view voting, and participation in political life in general, as a diversion from other, more fruitful efforts. Why divert time, energy, and capital into the Establishment’s process, they ask, when you could direct such efforts to demonstrating discontent with both the Establishment and its process?

Ethical Non-voters

In addition to strategic non-voters, there are also *ethical non-voters*, those who reject voting outright, not merely as an ineffective tactic for change, but moreover because they view the act as either (A) a grant of consent by the voter to be governed by the state, (B) a means of imposing illegitimate control and rulership over one’s countrymen, or (C) both A and B. Thus, this view holds that through voting, one necessarily finds herself violating the non-aggression axiom.

* *Apathetic non-voting* would simply be the act of not-voting motivated by an apathy about politics generally. It is not the author’s intent here to delve into the phenomenology of apathetic non-voting, although the phenomenon certainly exists.

Ideology

Strategic and ethical non-voting are not mutually exclusive, of course, and for many non-voters, these two rationales overlap.

Anarcho-libertarian ideologies that generally advocate non-voting as a key strategy for social or political change include voluntaryism and agorism.

Criticism

Radical libertarian Murray N. Rothbard expressed criticisms against ethical non-voting, but not against strategic non-voting. In Rothbard's view, non-voting could be used as a potential method of effecting change, especially when no candidate with clearly-better positions is available. But, according to Rothbard, there was nothing inherently unethical about voting since the voter is not the one who placed herself in the position she finds herself. Rather, she was placed there by the state. Thus, in Rothbard's view, it is not unethical to use voting as a tool of self-defence, just as it is not unethical to use government-controlled roads (although it would only be unethical if one is petitioning the state *for* state ownership of roads).

Rothbard also held that the ethical non-voters are falling prey to the democrat's theory of the state, rather than forging their own. The democratic view of the state is that one grants consent to the state through voting, that the vote is in effect the tool through which one agrees to a social contract. Citing Lysander Spooner, Rothbard maintained that the state remains unethical—regardless of whether one votes—because the vote simply cannot ever imply legitimate consent given the coercive nature of the system in which the voting takes place.

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