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Electing Not to Vote

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1982,1985

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If elections are, as Sartre said, “a trap for fools,” then recent voting trends are in hopeful contrast with other signs of social somnolence. Not that election *results* are getting any better. They never will, so long as anybody wins. The good news is the steady growth of the nonvoting majority of eligibles which has been “winning” elections for over sixty years. In place of “majority rule” we see an increasingly unruly majority.

The 1984 presidential election — the Comet Kahoutek of recent politics — should have sharply reversed the trend; in fact it only stalled it. Despite a flashy ideological incumbent; despite the antics of Jesse Jackson, the Preacher from the Black Lagoon; despite the saliency of the nuclear war issue and a vote-or-die terror campaign by frantic leftists; and despite the relative decline in the size of the low-turnout youngest age-groups, most eligible voters, as usual, found better things to do.

For a system which makes “majority rule” the bywords and buzzwords of state-of-the-art statism, a chronic crisis simmers which, for once, will hurt Them more than it hurts us. It seems like the easier the authorities make it for their subjects to consecrate their coercion with their votes, the less response to their come-on. They

ended poll taxes and literacy tests, they enfranchised minorities and 18-year-olds, they provided bilingual ballots — but no one votes less often than the beneficiaries of these reforms.

“Democracy,” observed Karl Kraus, “means the permission to be everybody’s slave.” Its claimed superiority over other oppressive arrangements remains, after centuries of philosophy and propaganda, obscure. That an abstract, evanescent majority — of *whom*, is one of the central mysteries of democratic dogma — could ever claim more than the right to rule itself has always been a gross impertinence. Yet liberals and the leftists who tail them assure us, with a straight face, that those who participate in elections thereby agree to abide by the outcome, whereas those who abstain have no right to complain since, after all, they could have voted. This ritual, they assure us, magically *expands* the scope of legitimate authority, *i.e.*, cop violence. Beware of democrats offering rights! Such sophistries stand out in their proper satirical light when, year in and year out, the majority refuses to rule. What do I care if some cabal of ambitious opportunists declares me a member of some club I don’t want to join? Majority rule, shaky enough as a “right,” is openly malignant when imposed by a minority as a *duty*. Ralph “Darth” Nader is only a step ahead of his fellow paternalists in calling for compulsory voting.

The composition of the nonvoting majority is disturbing to our overlords. Liberals and leftists, when they’re not gushing slush about the wisdom of the people, when they’re not promising succor to the downtrodden, with typical cynicism defame nonvoters — hitherto mainly poor, minority, and foreign-born — as stupid, uneducated, and indifferent to their civic responsibilities if not downright un-American. But by now the voting drop reflects the ongoing coming-of-age of new eligibles who never do acquire the voting vice, and the attrition of those of their elders who never kick the habit. Most aren’t conscious refusniks, but their absence from the rolls today just may prefigure refusal of the roles tomorrow.

Naturally the (hamster-)wheeler-dealers of the left deliver the loyalists who make the system work for all their rejective rhetoric. So do the misnamed “libertarians,” some of whom hallucinate that they’re *anarchists*. For that matter, more than a few avowed “anarchists” slunk into voting booths in 1984, and anarcha-feminist “imagine” (sic) endorsed Mondale in the pages of *Circle A in Atlanta*, prompting Ted López to ask, What does the “A” really stand for? More usually these loyal oppositionists serve up pathetic no-win third parties which offer a “choice”; the choice, having gone to the bother of voting in the first place, of making absolutely certain (not just 99.99% certain) of wasting one’s vote. Proposals to reward voters with green stamps make more sense. Why not enfranchise pigeons and offer them pellets? The real meaning of “Don’t waste your vote” is, *don’t cast it*.

The mini-parties solicit votes as a form of “protest,” but as a medium of expression, a can of spray-paint has it all over *any* election. As conformist as voters are, no two of them mean precisely the same by their votes even if cast for the same candidate.

Yet the votes as tallied are anonymous, impersonal and interchangeable. A vote once cast is cast away; it then belongs to the pundits and politicians to make what they will of it. And a candidate once elected will tell you what to do, no matter what went before. You can’t protest fundamentals by voting: voting is bound up with them. There’s no such thing as voting *against voting*.

Contrary to the anthill collectivists, it’s stupid to say nonvoting is a merely personal, “individualistic” gesture. What could be more privatized and isolated than casting a “secret ballot” (evidently designed for people with *something to hide*) all by yourself which acknowledges your status as replaceable part of a polity you never asked to belong to? Collective action against electoral alienation is fully as feasible as running for office, but strangely, it holds no appeal for power-hungry “progressives.”

No need to address the populist reforms (initiative, referendum, recall, etc.) contrived to outflank corporate control of the state. At

best they never worked that way. At worst they became the vehicle for regressive “reforms” like California’s Proposition 13 which were KY’d into the body politic by monied cabals who buy the mass media. As with the Ptolemaic system, the effort to rectify the electoral system with epicycles inevitably went awry. The crisis of democracy transcends all gimmickry.

Every politician’s “platform” is a scaffold. Which of two fungible fakers assumes a particular office is a matter of decreasing relevance to reality. A voter is far more likely to be hit by a car on the way to the polls than s/he is of affecting the outcome of an election, to say nothing of changing real life.

How much lower will the vote totals go before the “winners” are ashamed or afraid to take office?

People aren’t as stupid as the politicians think. More and more of us are laughing off our “civic duty” to vote, rejecting the role of compulsory constituent.

What if they gave an election and nobody came? We’ll find out pretty soon.