

Voting vs. Direct Action

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People in the U.S. are preoccupied with voting to an unhealthy degree. This is not to say that everyone votes, or thinks voting is effective or worthwhile; on the contrary, a smaller and smaller proportion of the eligible population votes every election year, and that's not just because more and more people are in prison. But when you broach the question of politics, of having a say in the way things are, voting is just about the only strategy anyone can think of—voting, and influencing others' votes.

Could it be this is why so many people feel so disempowered? Is anonymously checking a box once a year, or every four years, enough to feel included in the political process, let alone play a role in it? But what is there besides voting?

In fact, voting for people to represent your interests is the least efficient and effective means of applying political power. The alternative, broadly speaking, is acting directly to represent your interests yourself.

This is known in some circles as “direct action.” Direct action is occasionally misunderstood to mean another kind of campaigning, lobbying for influence on elected officials by means of political activist tactics; but it properly refers to any action or strategy that cuts out the middle man and solves problems directly, without appealing to elected representatives, corporate interests, or other powers.

Concrete examples of direct action are everywhere. When people start their own organization to share food with hungry folks, instead of just voting for a candidate who promises to solve “the homeless problem” with tax dollars and bureaucracy, that's direct action. When a man makes and gives out fliers addressing an issue that concerns him, rather than counting on the newspapers to cover it or print his letters to the editor, that's direct action. When a woman forms a book club with her friends instead of paying to take classes at a school, or does what it takes to shut down an unwanted corporate superstore in her neighborhood rather than deferring to the authority of city planners, that's direct action, too. Direct action is the foundation of the old-fashioned can-do American ethic, hands-on and no-nonsense. Without it, hardly anything would get done.

In a lot of ways, direct action is a more effective means for people to have a say in society than voting is. For one thing, voting is a lottery—if a candidate doesn't get elected, then all the energy his constituency put into supporting him is wasted, as the power they were hoping he would exercise for them goes to someone else. With direct action, you can be sure that your work will offer some kind of results; and the resources you develop in the process, whether those be

experience, contacts and recognition in your community, or organizational infrastructure, cannot be taken away from you.

Voting consolidates the power of a whole society in the hands of a few politicians; through force of sheer habit, not to speak of other methods of enforcement, everyone else is kept in a position of dependence. Through direct action, you become familiar with your own resources and capabilities and initiative, discovering what these are and how much you can accomplish.

Voting forces everyone in a movement to try to agree on one platform; coalitions fight over what compromises to make, each faction insists that they know the best way and the others are messing everything up by not going along with their program. A lot of energy gets wasted in these disputes and recriminations. In direct action, on the other hand, no vast consensus is necessary: different groups can apply different approaches according to what they believe in and feel comfortable doing, which can still interact to form a mutually beneficial whole. People involved in different direct actions have no need to squabble, unless they really are seeking conflicting goals (or years of voting have taught them to fight with anyone who doesn't think exactly as they do). Conflicts over voting often distract from the real issues at hand, as people get caught up in the drama of one party against another, one candidate against another, one agenda against another. With direct action, on the other hand, the issues themselves are raised, addressed specifically, and often resolved.

Voting is only possible when election time comes around. Direct action can be applied whenever one sees fit. Voting is only useful for addressing whatever topics are current in the political agendas of candidates, while direct action can be applied in every aspect of your life, in every part of the world you live in.

Voting is glorified as "freedom" in action. It's not freedom— freedom is getting to decide what the choices are in the first place, not picking between Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Direct action is the real thing. You make the plan, you create the options, the sky's the limit.

Ultimately, there's no reason the strategies of voting and direct action can't both be applied together. One does not cancel the other out. The problem is that so many people think of voting as their primary way of exerting political and social power that a disproportionate amount of everyone's time and energy is spent deliberating and debating about it while other opportunities to make change go to waste. For months and months preceding every election, everyone argues about the voting issue, what candidates to vote for or whether to vote at all, when voting itself takes less than an hour. Vote or don't, but get on with it! Remember how many other ways you can make your voice heard.

This being an election year, we hear constantly about the options available to us as voters, and almost nothing about our other opportunities to play a decisive role in our society. What we need is a campaign to emphasize the possibilities more direct means of action and community involvement have to offer. These need not be seen as in contradiction with voting. We can spend an hour voting once a year, and the other three hundred sixty four days and twenty three hours acting directly!

Those who are totally disenchanted with representative democracy, who dream of a world without presidents and politicians, can rest assured that if we all learn how to apply deliberately the power that each of us has, the question of which politician is elected to office will become a moot point. They only have that power because we delegate it to them! A campaign for direct action puts power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people from whom it originates.

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