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## 7 Reasons to Hate Election Season

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2020

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*This is a piece from the first issue of Haters Magazine, tho the author would write the piece differently if written now, they have decided to leave it unedited since some people have found it useful. You can find a zine version of the essay here.*

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2020



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about where the resources allotted by politicians come from, and realize that these resources are provided by *people*, not lines on paper. We can do better—and it starts with divestment from politics.

## Further Reading

This essay was meant to be a succinct and basic summary on some anti-electoral stances. Two of the essays mentioned here are from *Anarchism and Other Essays* by Emma Goldman (very easily found as a .pdf or audiobook; individual essays are hosted on both Marxists.org and the Anarchist Library (theanarchistlibrary.org)), a good introduction to anarchism to the unacquainted.

All of the following should be available online:

- *Anarchists Do Not Vote, They Fight!* Black Phoenix Anarchist Union
- *Do Anarchists Vote In State Elections?* ziq
- *The Ballot Humbug* Lucy Parsons
- *The Ballot or The Bullet?* Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin
- *The Party's Over* CrimethInc
- *Voting Is Not Harm Reduction*, which can be found on Indigenous Action Media's website (www.indigenouaction.org)

winning move might just be to avoid the game altogether? Your Candidate needs you, but you need them less than you think.

And so you may think that, well, we can focus on both local projects and campaigning. But so much gets shoved to the side when election season comes in favor of getting people out and voting. It's like a sick sporting event. (To be honest I'm afraid of DSA's current mutual aid projects in a way—will these projects be abandoned as soon as the next Bernie comes along and they feel the need to devote all the energy they could be giving to actual people to another doomed campaign instead? How many times does this have to happen before hop off the hamster wheel? ) Notice how in these conversations too how the “short term” is always shifting. Why provide people with resources now when we might get a shot at more later? But the “more” might never come. And we don't have time to wait. Climate collapse does not loom over us—it's already begun. We must eschew Politics in favor of ourselves if we want to survive.

The state knows that it's not needed—watch how mutual aid projects are targeted by authorities as soon as they begin to build something real. You may be inclined to argue that voting is stifled, so does it not also pose a threat to the establishment? Not really. Within the establishment, there's a push and pull between assimilation and direct genocide. As Indigenous Action Media put it:

Historic acts of voter suppression appear to contradict the strategy of assimilation, after all, if white settler politicians desired so much for Indigenous Peoples to become citizens, why then would they actively disenfranchise them at the same time? This is the underlying contradiction of colonialism in the U.S. that has been articulated as the “Indian Problem,” or more bluntly, the question of annihilation or assimilation?

Overinvestment in Politics is learned helplessness. “We need better leadership.” Sigh and go to doing nothing. Instead, think

It's 2020, and it's that time again. Election season—and hate is in the air. Finally, many leftists in favor of voting are beginning to slide away from this bias, hopefully ready to lay down the last vestiges of liberalism, or even move past the left. What's more likely, however, is that a shiny new candidate—a Bernie 2—will come along and, provided elections continue, they'll fall back into their old campaign-obsessed ways. This isn't addressed to them alone. The following essay is also for those who ask, “Why wouldn't you vote?”; who say it's harmless; who say it's a “strategy.”

Voting: it's the reason for the season (election season). And we hate every second of it.

## ***1/ IT'S ALL JUST A GAME***

It's unclear whether the political game erodes empathy or shows how little there was to begin with. Maybe both. Either way, election season is a great time to find out who has their head all the way up their own ass—it's interesting that electoralists will use often throw accusations of moral superiority complexes at those who don't vote, and then go on to be ethically bankrupt while acting as the actual holier-than-thou party.

With the USPS in danger of being dismantled, many people worry that their medications, including time-sensitive meds, rely on the USPS. Many people who live in rural areas, including reservations, are at risk of not getting mail service at all. But the electoralists don't think of the people—they think of the game. So it immediately became a question of voting—*who cares if you can't get your insulin? What matters more is that you won't be able to vote.* It's all about the Republicans attacking voter rights so that not as many people can vote Democrat in November.

Here's an excerpt from an article in the *Rapid City Journal*, out of Rapid City, South Dakota, that details some impacts that closing

USPS offices in rural communities, particularly those on reservations, has:

Reservation residents depend upon their local post offices to keep their mailed medicines and Social Security, veterans' benefit and other checks safe. They do their business at the post office, buying money orders to pay their monthly expenses. Customers of the Allen, Manderson and Wounded Knee post offices frequently walk long distances or wait days to use precious gas to collect their mail.

Now, those same people are staggered by the news that the U.S. Postal Service has placed the three post offices on a list of almost 3,700 post offices under review for possible closings. Eighty small post offices across South Dakota are on the list, including 11 on or near reservations.

This may sound like a coordinated attack on the part of the Trump administration to restrict voting access. Except the article, entitled *Post Offices Vital to Reservation Communities*, was published in 2011, during Obama's first term in office, and is one of hundreds of similar articles from its time. The Obama Administration also made attempts to gut the postal service, so it's a little bit bizarre for liberals to use this as a reason to vote blue. More than that, it comes across as callous towards those impacted by post office closings and mail box removals in both 2011 and 2020. It's too bad that your life or livelihood might suffer—what's worse is that *my* team might lose.

This type of thinking can be seen elsewhere. What was once considered "extreme" weather is now the norm. In August, a massive derecho—a large line of storms—swept through Iowa, causing widespread destruction that included flooding, power outages, and

approach of mutual aid instead of diverting resources that could provide direct aid to those in need to campaigning. Would you not rather distribute food than campaign stickers?

## ***7/ WE CAN DO BETTER, AND MORE***

*But can't we do both?*

They say to vote to make it better in the "short term;" but the "short term" is also the "long term" if anyone ever points out that we could be making things better in the here and now instead of dumping all the effort and resources into campaigning. The meanings of short term and long term are constantly shifting in their meanings. Voting is a necessary evil because it "helps" people in the short term by providing them with social services once Your Candidate is in office. But we need to donate to campaigns and put all this money into campaigning costs and advertising and shit like that instead of giving the money and resources directly to the people who need them because we gotta think about the "long term." The goalposts are always changing here.

You're asking people to gamble with their lives.

The gamble is this: throw your current resources into a campaign hoping for a bigger return—a return that will always include compromise—ally yourself with dirty money if you want to win, begetting even more compromise, and if Your Candidate wins, then you might get some services or infrastructure or what you asked for. You might also get nothing because the candidate gets bought out by those with capital. If Your Candidate does not get elected, all that time and money has been thrown away completely and you, again, get nothing. Less than nothing—all the money put into paying campaigners and advertising is lost, and that's money and time that could have directly fed and clothed families, gotten people housed, filled in potholes, or worked towards whatever else it is you wanted fixed. Why is it such blasphemy to point out that the

by ongoing settler colonialism. And while the harm reduction sentiment may be sincere, even hard won marginal reforms gained through popular support can be just as easily reversed by the stroke of a politician's pen. If voting is the democratic participation in our own oppression, voting as harm reduction is a politics that keeps us at the mercy of our oppressors.

“Harm reduction” was actually a term coined by—and subsequently stolen from—drug abuse advocates. Harm reduction is about not punishing addicts for their addictions, and allowing people to engage with substances on their own terms rather than taking a prohibitionist or carceral approach. It's about acknowledging that some folks may not desire to live a “sober” lifestyle, allowing them to seek help on their own terms if they desire it. It neither glorifies nor shames substance use. Giving intravenous drug users clean syringes to cut down on disease transmission and giving naloxone to opioid users to prevent death from overdose are harm reduction initiatives.

Consider how this applies to voting. Does it?

Would it be helpful to conceptualize participation in Politics as an addiction? Probably not. You might be able to make a case for that sort of thinking, but I won't; personally I think Goldman's description of it being akin to a fetish (in the anthropological sense) is more apt. But what would harm reduction look like in this case? Would it look like coercing people into voting and participating in politics, or—following the spirit of the harm reduction coinage—would “harm reduction” in politics not mean attempting to minimize political participation—meaning, minimize reliance on system that stands against the proletariat, against any real climate action, against any real change? Is replicating these patterns of coercion “harm reduction,” even if you want to filter harm reduction through a political lens? This framing is flawed, but it seems like a more apt conclusion to be drawn from it would lead towards an

crop damage. In the following week, too many liberals took to social media to lament how this would impact Iowa voters' ability to go to the polls. Something similar happened as the west coast burned, as if Trump caused the wildfires that have been intensifying for similar reasons. Frenzied liberals again implored everyone to vote—but voting doesn't put out fires. And it's worth noting that the west coast is all blue. More importantly, Indigenous people and environmentalists have pointed out again and again that wildfires are intensified by settler governments banning of traditional controlled burns, which leads to a buildup of detritus that, once inevitably ignited, grows out of control. This will, like ecological collapse, happen regardless of political leadership as long as the land remains under colonial occupation.

Of course it's possible to be concerned over how these events are affecting people and also about voting, if the latter is what you care about. But to jump first to how any decision or crisis will impact your candidate and last to how actual humans are faring—and how voting will have any real impact on any of this? It feels asinine. Both parties invest heavily in fossil fuels. The democrats dropped ending fossil fuel dependence from their platform as usual, choosing to continue subsidizing dirty energy. The Paris Agreement was an infamous failure. And the severity of storms like the recent Iowa derechos is directly linked to climate change. Something that both parties—all political parties, considering that even the Greens' plans tend to be vague since they won't win anyway—refuse to address in any real, material capacity. It's a game, and it's a game of worthless platitudes and empty promises that the politicians will renege or dither on once in office.

Electoral obsession is the game of treating people like pawns and then yelling at those very same people for being upset at this treatment. It's big talk about “marginalized folk” and accusations of privilege that are more often than not thrown right back in the faces of marginalized folks. In fact, if you *are* from any marginalized demographic and have expressed a disdain for political theater,

there's a high likelihood that some liberal has insinuated that you *actually* don't know what's best for yourself if you abstain from voting. There's an assumption that if you're against voting then you either haven't thought it through or are too privileged to care.

## **2/ REPRESENTATION IS REPRESSION**

An accusation often thrown by the pro-voters at anyone who immediately doesn't put all their oppression cards on the table is one of "privilege." One darkly funny side effect of this tendency crops up occasionally: the person making the accusation will be more privileged than whoever they're whining at (the idea that privilege is a game of points to be added up is a gross oversimplification that I'm not trying to imply here). White liberals calling certain anti-electoral Black people "privileged" for not voting is a bizarre cognitive leap, but it happens, especially on the internet. But this is all anecdotal, so let's pretend that everyone who doesn't vote does so because they're too privileged to care or be harmed in any significant way. Here are two of the roads we can take here:

First, why should they? If someone doesn't vote out of privilege, then wouldn't you want them to abstain anyway?

Because, second, why would they have any motivation to vote in your favor—provided you're all concerned with human rights and equality and whatever other Enlightenment buzzwords you think have meaningful value? Those with privilege will tend to vote with their own interests in mind; all historical precedent points to this. You can try and obfuscate this by, for example, acting like rural whites voted for Trump because they're rural and not because they're white. Whiteness has everything to do with the way they, like their counterparts in the cities and suburbs, voted. Wouldn't the vote of the less privileged have more sway if the privileged abstained from voting?

If you're into lobbying and politics and electoralism, if descriptions and depictions of actual direct action make you angry or scared because people are being inconvenienced or hurt or even killed or property is being damaged, then you need to stop playing radical dress-up and stop using "direct action" as an excuse for your electoral fetish or go call your senator or something you approve of.

## **6/ VOTING IS NOT HARM REDUCTION**

Voting is not harm reduction. For electoralists making the "voting is harm reduction" argument, this seems like a case of, "I saw this term and assumed that I knew what it meant." In the essay *Voting Isn't Harm Reduction, An Indigenous Perspective*, published on Indigenous Action's website, the author or authors actually spend less time discussing the issue of harm reduction, instead using this myth to transition into a discussion on how voting has and continues to be a tool of colonialism via the coerced assimilation of Indigenous peoples in the "United States" (although this is true elsewhere too). Still, in the beginning of the essay they point this out:

We don't dismiss the reality that, on the scale of U.S. settler colonial violence, even the slightest degree of harm can mean life or death for those most vulnerable. What we assert here is that the entire notion of "voting as harm reduction" obscures and perpetuates settler-colonial violence, there is nothing "less harmful" about it, and there are more effective ways to intervene in its violences.

[...]

[V]oting can never be a survival strategy under colonial rule. It's a strategy of defeat and victimhood that protracts the suffering and historical harm induced



and nothing more (than vague promises) then what's the point in calling it direct action? There's no direction and there's no action. Calling voting "direct action" doesn't make sense. That's like saying voting is "mutual aid" because some social services may or may not be allotted to your area by the candidate you voted for. Voting is begging for scraps—that's an antithesis to direct action. Graeber often defines "direct action" as some iteration of how it "means insisting on acting as if one is already free." Emma Goldman discusses direct action in *Anarchism: What It Really Stands For* (1910):

Even were the workers able to have their own representatives, for which our good Socialist politicians are clamoring, what chances are there for their honesty and good faith? One has but to bear in mind the process of politics to realize that its path of good intentions is full of pitfalls: wire-pulling, intriguing, flattering, lying, cheating; in fact, chicanery of every description, whereby the political aspirant can achieve success. [...] Time and time again the people were foolish enough to trust, believe, and support with their last farthing aspiring politicians, only to find themselves betrayed and cheated.

[...]

The political superstition is still holding sway over the hearts and minds of the masses, but the true lovers of liberty will have no more to do with it. Instead, they believe with Stirner that man has as much liberty as he is willing to take. Anarchism therefore stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic, social, and moral. But defiance and resistance are illegal. Therein lies the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage.

Often the next line of argument is that many "underprivileged" folks, such as many immigrants and in particular undocumented immigrants, can't vote, and so the "privileged" must wield their electoral power in the favor of those who can't vote. There are problems with this idea. The political philanthropy idea is patronizing to the point of insult. There's no such thing as being a voice for the voiceless—people are "voiceless" because they're being talked over. And that's what our electoral system is.

Acting like anyone's interchangeable is dehumanizing, and even pretending that some shared identities equals common goals, especially considering the fact that many of these groupings—such as the "LGBT community" or "Latin Americans" or "Asian Americans"—are not coherent enough to be meaningful. You can even belong to the same "community" as someone else...while also not, *really*, belonging to the same community because of this lack of coherence and nebulousness of terminology as it relates to "community."

Of course, most arguments in the direction of representation are also predicated on the idea that the U.S. system is truly representational. "If we only had this group represented in congress, then they could empower their community!" is the same argument that supporters of capitalism make; "If only this group could own more businesses, the revenue will go back into their communities." Exploitation is not empowerment. Politicians exploit "their" constituency like capitalists exploit "their" community. When someone is elected into office, their relationship to whatever community they claim changes—they now have power. ziq put it succinctly: "Giving a person power and expecting them to not use it to cement even more power for themselves is as foolish as Charlie Brown trying to kick the football while Lucy holds it."

A politician makes sacrifices to get into office, and those sacrifices are invariably at the expense of the most vulnerable among "their" constituency to appeal to the voters with the most capital—this only becomes more egregious as one moves up the ladder from

local to federal. As Lucy Parsons pointed out over a century ago in *The Ballot Humbug*, it's "money and not votes" that "rules the people. Capitalists no longer care to buy the voters, they simply buy the 'servants' after they have been elected to 'serve.' The idea that the poor man's vote amounts to anything is the veriest delusion. The ballot is only the paper veil that hides the tricks."

*Your vote doesn't matter.*

### **3/CITIZENSHIP IS AN INSULT**

Citizenship, like representation, like progress, is also predicated on assimilation and coercion. It's a "Join, or Die" system. Why clamor for recognition from the state? For services like healthcare and infrastructure? Why is a state even necessary in instances like this? Infrastructure projects are put in place in service to colonial interests and/or in service to capital; see the railroad and highway systems as examples. Even free healthcare under capitalism is only in place to ensure a more productive proletariat.

It's insulting to tell someone privileged with citizenship that they must vote for the good of the noncitizen who cannot vote. The ICE concentration camps will not be voted away. The citizen cannot exist without the noncitizen—the exploiter cannot exist without the exploited. This means that suffering on a grand scale will happen as long as the empire is in place. Even if the U.S. could be voted into a functional social democracy or welfare state, this all comes at the expense of someone. Do the lives of the poor in Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, and all the other places the U.S. destabilizes and reigns terror upon not matter as long as you can share in the spoils of war? You cannot harbor a desire for a piece of the wealth with no regard for where that wealth comes from. Participation in this system legitimizes this. But this is the part of the argument that electoralists are often calling moralistic and theoretical—and if Not America exists only in

### **5/ VOTING IS NOT DIRECT ACTION**

*This is going to be brief, since the answer to this claim is: no. No, it's not.*

"Direct action" means different things in different circles. The IWW, Industrial Workers of the World, used the term for gilded age strikes. Anarchists, communists, leftists, activists, et al. will talk about "propaganda of the deed," sabotage, varying levels of violence and nonviolence, terrorism. And it can be nebulous at times, especially when the more useful conversation revolves around "What works?" rather than semantics. But one thing is clear for sure: voting is not direct action.

In *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, David Graeber gives insight into some difference between direct action and civil disobedience, both terms often abused by liberals:

Typically, one practicing civil disobedience is also willing to accept the legal consequences of his actions. Direct action takes matters a step further. The direct actionist does not just refuse to pay taxes to support a militarized school system, she combines with others to try to create a new school system that operates on different principles. She proceeds as she would if the state did not exist and leaves it to the state's representatives to decide whether to try to send armed men to stop her.

Direct action is about asserting yourself. That can mean making demands via strike; it can mean throwing Molotovs. The former may be demanding better working conditions; the latter may be trying to set a building on fire. There is a goal in mind to *directly* achieve. Electoralism is indirect by nature. There are no demands to voting—just, again, vague promises. Direct action doesn't necessitate demands, but if the end goal is getting a candidate elected

“heads of households” to receive 160 acres with any remaining lands put up for sale to white invaders who flocked in droves to inherit their “Manifest Destiny.” Indigenous Peoples who accepted allotments could receive U.S. citizenship, and although this was the first congressional act to provide the status, it came at the expense of sacrificing Indigenous People’s cultural and political identities in many ways, particularly by further fracturing the integrity of Indigenous matriarchal societies. Under the Dawes Act, Indigenous lands were reduced from 138 million to 52 million acres. In 1890, the overall Indigenous population was reduced to about 250,000 from tens of millions at the time of initial European invasion. In contrast, the colonizer’s U.S. population had increased to 62,622,250 the same year.

[...]

U.S. citizenship was imposed to destroy Indigenous sovereignty and facilitate mass-scale land theft. To this day, the “Native vote” is bound to assimilationist conditions that serve colonial interests.

Genocide, like slavery, is ongoing and bipartisan. The Standing Rock protests happened under the Obama administration, which was also able to stymie “progressive” movements like Occupy and then for a time Black Lives Matter. Electoralism does not propel us gradually towards a freer state of being. You cannot tweak the system or adjust the course to some idyllic perfect democracy because the system is functioning as intended; why would wealthy white racists of the eighteenth century care to conceptualize a system that could be used to put them on the same level as even poor whites, let alone the slaves that many of them “owned”?

the realm of theoretical, then sure. It’s pure theory. A lot of arguments center themselves on how electoralism doesn’t help, but in many ways it’s an active disservice to the communities that liberals and leftists always wanna pretend to care so much about.

#### 4/ PROGRESS IS A MYTH

In *The Ballot Humbug*, Parsons also said: “We know there never was a law passed that ever prevented one single crime from being committed.” Likewise, there isn’t a single social issue or societal ill or injustice or policy of depravity that has been voted into oblivion. Maybe the earliest progressives and communists who ran for office in vain can be forgiven, a little; there wasn’t yet a precedent for progressives in office, or failing to be placed in office. It should, however, be noted that many of their contemporaries were already offering criticisms of the electoral system. The idea that everything will naturally “get better” if we can put the right people in power as today’s progressives seem to think isn’t supported by any historical evidence.

Slavery didn’t end. They work on plantations in the South, fight fires in California, and work in factories New York. The slaves of today may be given air conditioning and \$3 an hour for their more strenuous labor (minimum wage for prisoners is eighty-six cents)—is that progress? It’s no coincidence that that the U.S. prison population is heavily racialized—most statistics put the percentage of Black inmates at around 40%, even though Black Americans make up less than 15% of the total U.S. population. Louisiana State Penitentiary is built on the site of a former plantation, a majority of its population is Black, and many of them get assigned to till the same plot of soil worked by slaves less than two centuries ago. Is this kind of progress significant enough to warrant a continuation of this system, so that maybe, in an alternate universe where climate change doesn’t kill us all by then, *maybe* our great grand-

children can live to see the day where prisoners are paid \$8 an hour? The evils of the American empire don't wither away under electoral or legislative pressure—concessions granted have always taken protests (usually less-than-peaceful), riots, and, in the case of “officially” ending chattel slavery, a whole civil war. And even then they had to put a provision in the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment—that infamous line: *except as punishment for a crime*.

This may seem counter intuitive considering suffrage was one of the “rights” allegedly fought for by activists of the past. But that argument—that “people fought for y/our right to vote so you should show y/our gratitude by voting”—flattens “activists” of the past into one single-minded Movement. That’s not how anything ever works. Anarchists like Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons criticized their contemporaneous women’s suffrage movement. Parsons referred to electoralism as a “modern delusion” in 1905; Goldman, in her 1911 essay *Woman Suffrage*, called it “fetich worship.” In the essay, Goldman points out some of contradictions that were clear even at the time:

The poor, stupid, free American citizen! Free to starve, free to tramp the highways of this great country, he enjoys universal suffrage, and, by that right, he has forged chains about his limbs. The reward that he receives is stringent labor laws prohibiting the right of boycott, of picketing, in fact, of everything, except the right to be robbed of the fruits of his labor.

Following that, *Woman Suffrage* also acts as an early criticism of the empty representation-based politics so prevalent in today’s progressive circles:

[...]Yet all these disastrous results of the twentieth-century fetich have taught woman nothing. But, then, woman will purify politics, we are assured.

Needless to say, I am not opposed to woman suffrage on the conventional ground that she is not equal to it. I see neither physical, psychological, nor mental reasons why woman should not have the equal right to vote with man. [...] Since woman’s greatest misfortune has been that she was looked upon as either angel or devil, her true salvation lies in being placed on earth; namely, in being considered human, and therefore subject to all human follies and mistakes. Are we, then, to believe that two errors will make a right? Are we to assume that the poison already inherent in politics will be decreased, if women were to enter the political arena?

Ideas of representation within the current status quo go hand-in-hand with ideas about “progress,” because we’re told that an increase in representation is a positive side effect of this progress. But this is based on assimilationist ideas—representation is the reward for assimilation, and assimilation is predicated on subjugation. The “minorities” must always compromise—you must not seem too threatening to the establishment to be rewarded with representation. You must be the right kind of Black, “hard-working” if you’re disabled, an unwaveringly patriotic immigrant, a white-picket-fence gay, a trans person who “tries.” Progress as assimilation is not a forward march; it’s cyclical, a dog chasing its own tail. It’s based on compromise after compromise until you’ve been chewed up, re-digested and shat out enough times to be acceptable. In *Voting is Not Harm Reduction*, the author or authors discuss the ties between assimilation and the “Native vote”:

In 1887, U.S. Congress passed the General Allotment Act, more commonly known as the Dawes Act, which was designed to expedite colonial invasion, facilitate resource extraction, and to further assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the colonial social order. The Dawes Act marked a shift from a military strategy to an economic and political one where reservations were separated into individual lots, with only male