

An Eight-Point Brief for LEV (lesser evil voting)

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Preamble: Among the elements of the weak form of democracy enshrined in the constitution, presidential elections continue to pose a dilemma for the left in that any form of participation or non participation appears to impose a significant cost on our capacity to develop a serious opposition to the corporate agenda served by establishment politicians. The position outlined below is that which many regard as the most effective response to this quadrennial Hobson's choice, namely the so-called "lesser evil" voting strategy or LEV. Simply put, LEV involves, where you can, i.e. in safe states, voting for the losing third party candidate you prefer, or not voting at all. In competitive "swing" states, where you must, one votes for the "lesser evil" Democrat.

Before fielding objections, it will be useful to make certain background stipulations with respect to the points below. The first is to note that since changes in the relevant facts require changes in tactics, proposals having to do with our relationship to the "electoral extravaganza" should be regarded as provisional. This is most relevant with respect to point 3) which some will challenge by citing the claim that Clinton's foreign policy could pose a more serious menace than that of Trump.

In any case, while conceding as an outside possibility that Trump's foreign policy is preferable, most of us not already convinced that that is so will need more evidence than can be aired in a discussion involving this statement. Furthermore, insofar as this is the fact of the matter, following the logic through seems to require a vote for Trump, though it's a bit hard to know whether those making this suggestion are intending it seriously.

Another point of disagreement is not factual but involves the ethical/moral principle addressed in 1), sometimes referred to as the "politics of moral witness." Generally associated with the religious left, secular leftists implicitly invoke it when they reject LEV on the grounds that "a lesser of two evils is still evil." Leaving aside the obvious rejoinder that this is exactly the point of lesser evil voting-i.e. to do less evil, what needs to be challenged is the assumption that voting should be seen a form of individual self-expression rather than as an act to be judged on its likely consequences, specifically those outlined in 4). The basic moral principle at stake is simple: not only must we take responsibility for our actions, but the consequences of our actions for others are a far more important consideration than feeling good about ourselves.

While some would suggest extending the critique by noting that the politics of moral witness can become indistinguishable from narcissistic self-aggrandizement, this is substantially more harsh than what was intended and harsher than what is merited. That said, those reflexively denouncing advocates of LEV on a supposed "moral" basis should consider that their footing on the high ground may not be as secure as they often take for granted to be the case.

A third criticism of LEV equates it with a passive acquiescence to the bipartisan status quo under

the guise of pragmatism, usually deriving from those who have lost the appetite for radical change. It is surely the case that some of those endorsing LEV are doing so in bad faith-cynical functionaries whose objective is to promote capitulation to a system which they are invested in protecting. Others supporting LEV, however, can hardly be reasonably accused of having made their peace with the establishment. Their concern, as alluded to in 6) and 7) inheres in the awareness that frivolous and poorly considered electoral decisions impose a cost, their memories extending to the ultra-left faction of the peace movement having minimized the comparative dangers of the Nixon presidency during the 1968 elections. The result was six years of senseless death and destruction in Southeast Asia and also a predictable fracture of the left setting it up for its ultimate collapse during the backlash decades to follow.

The broader lesson to be drawn is not to shy away from confronting the dominance of the political system under the management of the two major parties. Rather, challenges to it need to be issued with a full awareness of their possible consequences. This includes the recognition that far right victories not only impose terrible suffering on the most vulnerable segments of society but also function as a powerful weapon in the hands of the establishment center, which, now in opposition can posture as the “reasonable” alternative. A Trump presidency, should it materialize, will undermine the burgeoning movement centered around the Sanders campaign, particularly if it is perceived as having minimized the dangers posed by the far right.

A more general conclusion to be derived from this recognition is that this sort of cost/benefit strategic accounting is fundamental to any politics which is serious about radical change. Those on the left who ignore it, or dismiss it as irrelevant are engaging in political fantasy and are an obstacle to, rather than ally of, the movement which now seems to be materializing.

Finally, it should be understood that the reigning doctrinal system recognizes the role presidential elections perform in diverting the left from actions which have the potential to be effective in advancing its agenda. These include developing organizations committed to extra-political means, most notably street protest, but also competing for office in potentially winnable races. The left should devote the minimum of time necessary to exercise the LEV choice then immediately return to pursuing goals which are not timed to the national electoral cycle.

1) Voting should not be viewed as a form of personal self-expression or moral judgement directed in retaliation towards major party candidates who fail to reflect our values, or of a corrupt system designed to limit choices to those acceptable to corporate elites.

2) The exclusive consequence of the act of voting in 2016 will be (if in a contested “swing state”) to marginally increase or decrease the chance of one of the major party candidates winning.

3) One of these candidates, Trump, denies the existence of global warming, calls for increasing use of fossil fuels, dismantling of environmental regulations and refuses assistance to India and other developing nations as called for in the Paris agreement, the combination of which could, in four years, take us to a catastrophic tipping point. Trump has also pledged to deport 11 million Mexican immigrants, offered to provide for the defense of supporters who have assaulted African American protestors at his rallies, stated his “openness to using nuclear weapons”, supports a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. and regards “the police in this country as absolutely mistreated and misunderstood” while having “done an unbelievable job of keeping law and order.” Trump has also

pledged to increase military spending while cutting taxes on the rich, hence shredding what remains of the social welfare “safety net” despite pretenses.

4) The suffering which these and other similarly extremist policies and attitudes will impose on marginalized and already oppressed populations has a high probability of being significantly greater than that which will result from a Clinton presidency.

5) 4) should constitute sufficient basis to voting for Clinton where a vote is potentially consequential—namely, in a contested, “swing” state.

6) However, the left should also recognize that, should Trump win based on its failure to support Clinton, it will repeatedly face the accusation (based in fact), that it lacks concern for those sure to be most victimized by a Trump administration.

7) Often this charge will emanate from establishment operatives who will use it as a bad faith justification for defeating challenges to corporate hegemony either in the Democratic Party or outside of it. They will ensure that it will be widely circulated in mainstream media channels with the result that many of those who would otherwise be sympathetic to a left challenge will find it a convincing reason to maintain their ties with the political establishment rather than breaking with it, as they must.

8) Conclusion: by dismissing a “lesser evil” electoral logic and thereby increasing the potential for Clinton’s defeat the left will undermine what should be at the core of what it claims to be attempting to achieve.

[This article originally appeared on John Halle's blog, Outrages and Interludes.]