

# Don't Just Vote or Not Vote

July 31, 2024



## Symposium on the U.S. Election

This article is part of a symposium on the U.S. election.

The U.S. Left has long debated how to respond to elections and this year the controversy is more intense than usual. We asked two thoughtful left commentators—Rebecca Gordon and Natalia Tylim—to give their contrasting views on the November election and then we got brief personal comments from several members of the *New Politics* editorial board. Please note that these articles were completed before the June 27 Biden-Trump debate. The arguments advanced regarding Biden and the election more or less still apply if the Democrats replace him with another politically comparable candidate.

The Lesser Evil Is Still Less Evil, *Rebecca Gordon*

No Election Can Save Us: Confronting Genocide and Creeping Fascism, *Natalia Tylim*

Vote To Save Our Basic Civil Rights, *Frieda Afary*

Don't Just Vote or Not Vote, *Daniel Fischer*

The Election and Left Responsibility, *Stephen R. Shalom*



By surrendering much of their organizing capacity and most of their votes to the Democratic Party, unions and progressive organizations have allowed Democratic leaders to take them for granted and focus instead on courting wealthy funders. This has been one factor pushing politicians to the right on economic and other issues since the 1970s. The party that once implemented the New Deal, Great Society, and civil rights reforms has since partnered with Republicans to deliver mass incarceration and mass deportation, free-trade pacts, bank bailouts, the War on Terror, and accelerated fossil-fuel production. Biden has been no exception, presiding over record levels of oil and gas extraction, deportations of migrants, police shootings, and Israeli airstrikes. Still, Trump promises an even more authoritarian and ecocidal agenda. Because Washington rejects basic democratic reforms such as ranked-choice voting, the left faces an apparent double bind. Do we support the lesser evil and let it continue morphing into the greater evil? Or do we refuse and risk enabling the greater evil's immediate ascent? Such electorally focused questions miss the point for a couple of reasons.

First, the chances of a protest vote or abstention impacting the outcome of a presidential election is nearly zero, especially in the 40 to 45 "safe states" where either Trump or Biden has already locked in victory. Even in the five to ten competitive "swing states," independent votes won't likely tip the scales in Trump's favor, as Howie Hawkins explained in the Winter 2024 issue of *New Politics*, based on recent Green totals.

For those concerned, vote swapping offers an easy solution for swing-state residents wanting to stop Trump. Someone who was going to vote Democratic could find someone who was going to vote Republican, and both could agree not to vote for the major party candidates. Or, someone who was going to cast a protest vote could reach out to safe-state Biden supporters and offer to swap votes. A Michigan voter might say to a couple New York voters, "I was going to vote 'uncommitted' here, but if you both vote 'uncommitted,' then in return I'll hold my nose and vote for Biden." Democratic-leaning groups could even create vote-swapping websites to facilitate such discussions. A 2007 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals confirmed such websites are legal.

Second, grassroots organizing and direct action create more effective change than voting. Powerful labor and civil rights movements compelled Democrats to implement major reforms in the 1930s and 1960s. In the early 1970s, an independent grassroots compelled even the Republican-run government to end the Vietnam War, raise food stamp and Social Security funding, legalize abortion, and establish the EPA and OSHA. The alter-globalization and Occupy movements, despite their smaller base of participants, spread radically anti-corporate sentiments and influenced some policy shifts away from the free-trade and free-market "Washington Consensus" that triumphed in the 1990s. Whoever is elected, we need to focus on building movements to transform society.