

# No Election Can Save Us

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*



No election can save us. Call me orthodox if you want, but it's a truism that socialists would do well to come back to. Elections—even of socialists or working-class militants—are not capable of carrying out a radical or progressive program, nor of pushing back the right wing's agenda, if not rooted and connected to a strategy of nationally coordinated action that is premised on independent class organizing.

If we want transformative change, we need socialist organizations that can contend in the political realm. Yes, this includes participating in elections, but primarily it means workers and the oppressed becoming aware of the power of their own activity and learning how to exercise it. We need to advance a strategy based on the rebuilding of independent institutions, organizations, and unions that can assert a political alternative to the interests of capital and to U.S. imperialism in order for such a left force to finally break through in the United States. Any tactics we use must be in the service of that strategy.

Elections can and are a piece of that strategy of independent self-activity and participation in mass movements and strikes, but we need to be clear what role they play. The goal of an election should not be to win a particular seat or office, but rather to support the strength of movements and actions of the exploited and oppressed. Sometimes that means winning an election. Sometimes it means using an electoral campaign to amplify demands and help cohere more organizations as launch pads to accelerated actions. This means being prepared to withstand the pressures of electoral activity

that often compel campaigns to change or tone down their demands or tactics for the sake of a more viable election. While this could help advance an individual campaign, it is poorly suited to the task of charting a way forward for independent action—let alone an independent party.

We need movements to be able to stand on their own two feet and to be in a position to shape demands and solutions, rather than deferring to elected officials to do that work for us. No politician, even ones that are committed to left causes, can change the balance of forces for us. Only struggle can do that.

There is a very particular liberal *strategy* of lesser evilism that subsumes all questions to the importance of a Democratic, in this case a Biden, presidency. The argument goes something along the lines of: Biden winning is the only thing standing in the way of democracy being replaced by fascism. This strategy narrows politics to the question of who one will vote for, and how hard they are willing to campaign in the electoral realm. While this sometimes translates into individual pressure—“if you don’t do this, the worse guy will win, and it will be your fault”—it is more than that. It is a politics that sees voting and participation within our limited political system as the path to standing our ground and preventing things from getting worse. It is built around active campaigning and the dedication of valuable political and human resources to supporting the Democratic Party. This means using the materials and talking points of a party that does not share our goals. It means subsuming demands and arguments to whatever will convince others to vote for Biden—to whatever it will take to win an election.

When it comes down to it, what an individual voter does in the voting booth is the least of our concerns. What we need is a frank discussion about what *strategy* the Left should advance to bring us closer to being a force that can stop the genocide, end police violence, win universal health care...among a million other demands and goals in the interests of the exploited and the oppressed. This is not a moral question, it’s a strategic one. If someone convinces you on a moral level to vote for Biden against Trump, so be it. And on the flipside, there are compelling moral arguments not to vote for Biden. I personally am not above moral persuasion. I didn’t vote for Biden in 2020. I will not vote for Genocide Joe in 2024. But let’s not confuse my individual choice with an argument for what we do and build together. Who someone votes for in 60 seconds on election day has very little to do with how we answer the question of what the Left should do and say, and how we build organizations of the Left that can do and say those things. No individual, regardless of how big their platform is, can play the social and political role that organizations can.

Maybe it feels like the distant past now, but only eight years ago, in 2016, the question of independent socialist organization was in the air with the Sanders campaign and the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Whatever the relationship (or lack thereof) between Sanders and DSA, the experience proved disorienting, especially when the political terrain inevitably began to shift. In 2020, unlike in 2016, Sanders swiftly bowed out of the election and threw his weight behind the idea that supporting Biden’s leadership was the most important strategy to follow to prevent a second Trump term. In 2024, Sanders and the Squad waited even less time to raise the flag for Biden.

The perceived success of the Sanders phenomenon in popularizing the ideas of socialism, somehow gave way to a *strategy* within a section of the Left that insists the way to build towards socialism is through a closeness with Democratic Party campaigns. Somewhere along the way the lines got crossed and this led to political confusion and demoralization for many of those previously advocating an independent path. The pursuit of alliances at the level of party politics in the 2016 and 2020 elections cut against the goal of a strengthened independent Left and weakened the potential to collectively build something new. We missed key opportunities that we need to honestly assess and learn from.

In 2016/2020 many argued, with excitement, that Democrats were looking to a coalition with progressive and left forces to court the youth vote. In 2024, there's no whiff of even that. Biden is pursuing a much more rightward-moving coalition, courting the never-Trump Republicans instead of the Black Lives Matter militants. This, in part, reflects the fact that while the Left missed the chance to break new ground in the previous political moment, the Right has risen to the occasion. And in this scenario, a focus on high politics as the driving strategy for the Left is not only counter to our short and long-term goals, but is also dangerous.

There is something deep and profound happening that is causing terrifying instability in the capitalist system. Liberals want things to stay the same, hold the line, defend the status quo, keep things stable. But that ship has sailed. And working-class people live the impacts of it. It is felt economically as inflation soars and more and more people are unable to pay for housing. It is felt in the backlash to the heights of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In attacks on trans youth. In the use of police as the tool of social control and in the continued epidemic of racist murders and incarcerations. In the use of military force on the border against families escaping violence and famine in search of a livable situation. It is experienced in the home as the social reproductive burden only grows while access to bodily autonomy is under full-frontal attack. In the bans on teaching about slavery and civil rights in schools. That is the status quo and people live it. Few people's lives have gotten easier because Biden won in 2020.

It is incumbent on our side to be able to present a strategy that distinguishes itself from the liberal defense and normalization of the system. Our lives will continue to get worse and more dangerous if the only radical alternatives on offer come from the Right (however archaic and regressive, they are radical, and they are organized). One of the frightening things about this political moment is the way the far right have positioned themselves as the anti-system forces, with the Left often appearing to be the most ardent defenders of the bureaucratized institutions of the state. Without a clear left strategy and perspective on offer, the Right at least seems to understand the assignment and grows its influence on that basis.

To be clear, this is not an argument that Biden and Trump are the same or that they represent the same danger. But if we are serious about dealing with the threat of authoritarianism, we cannot ally ourselves with these forces of the state, lest we cede the radical solutions to the crisis to the Right. We cannot afford to be silent about the dangers that also exist under a Biden presidency, or we risk being subsumed into it. Our success in staving off the worst of what Trump represents lies in our ability (or inability) to put forward an alternative explanation and vision, and most importantly to build institutions that ordinary people can join in order to fight for that vision collectively.

Whatever the specific and unique dynamics of the 2024 election cycle, and however clear the need for an independent organization, we keep coming back to the same conundrum: the choices are between two unpopular parties (and not just unpopular, but also hostile and dangerous). This goes straight to the heart of the recurring challenge of the U.S. Left. What does the Left do when every attempt to build a party that can stand for its principles—in other words, a party that is not compromised by capital—has been undermined, squashed, out-organized, or co-opted? This challenge will not be overcome this election cycle. There are third party options, but let's not pretend that they have the capacity of overtaking the undemocratic system that we live under in 2024. What we *can* do this election cycle, is to commit to building the foundations of organizations that can become the constituent parts of future political breakthroughs. The Palestine movement shows in no uncertain terms the depth and breadth of the radicalization. How quickly the system can be named as an impediment to change—not for the first time in the last four years, but palpable still. How do we finally break free of this impasse that constrains the strategic outlook of the Left and our horizon?

It should be impossible to think about this election in the absence of a perspective around Palestine. How do you stop a genocide? This is a question that anyone with a humane bone in their body has asked themselves many times during the latest escalation of ethnic cleansing. Has a single person thought to themselves: oh, if only Biden wins again, the bloodlust and torture will end? The same Biden who has funded and defended the Israeli state's war crimes his whole career?

The whole world is watching. We are on our feet. Campus encampments have spread. Labor activists have pushed envelopes in asserting the demand for a ceasefire in a union movement that rarely takes political positions. There have been painful-to-watch self-immolations and acts of military resistance. Even as the repression rises, the resolve remains. How does this just keep going? How do we live with the shame of a world that allows an entire people to be targeted and wiped out? Bloodlines and family names erased from the world. Children starved to death, not by scarcity, but by the violence of imperial and colonial interests.

How do you stop a genocide? And why can't moral outrage be enough? If only it were enough to put our bodies on the line. To bring highways to a halt. To sleep in tents on campuses in the face of repression and retaliation. If moral outrage were enough, Gaza would be free. But as we know, our enemies are powerful. Their actions are not incidental. And if they can't be influenced by moral compulsion, then we'll need to shut everything down. We're not organized or strong enough to do that yet, so we'll have to work backwards from that goal. If we are following a strategy that sees the need for mass disruptive, coordinated action, it is clear that—regardless of who individuals choose to vote for or not vote for on that one day in November—as a movement, campaigning for a Democrat is a poor tactic that runs counter to our goals.

Our limited resources and energy need to be spent fostering the new labor networks for Palestine, learning the lessons from the encampments, developing BDS campaigns, and forging national networks. We must assert, in no uncertain terms, that we have seen who is and is not on the side of liberation. We have seen first-hand how many months of protest it took for leading Democrats (Bernie included) to even consider a "ceasefire" and they still won't consider a permanent one. We cannot let this moment be lost to those who do not stand for what we are fighting for. We need to do what is necessary to free Palestine. What is necessary to free Palestine is intractably linked to our ability or inability to build the Left as an independent force in U.S. politics. It is Palestine, not a vote for Biden, that represents a strategic vision for how a Left in the belly of the beast can be rebuilt.