

# The Election and Left Responsibility

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*



There are those who assert that even in a swing state they will not vote for Biden in November, despite believing that Trump would be far worse for Palestinians, for the left, and for humankind. Asked “What will you say if your vote turns out to be the difference between Biden or Trump winning?” some answer, “It won’t be my fault, it will be Biden’s fault. If he pursued a decent policy on Gaza, he would have gotten my vote.”

This, I suggest, is a politically and morally flawed response.

You don’t eliminate your responsibility for an awful outcome because others share that responsibility.

Imagine that someone whom you’ve repeatedly warned not to swim in dangerous waters is drowning. You are able to throw them a life preserver and save them, but you refuse to do so, and they drown. Would anyone consider it a morally acceptable response for you to say, “It’s not my fault they died; it’s their fault. If they had listened to me, they would be alive now.” Yes, but they would also be alive had you thrown them the life preserver. There are two morally culpable actors here: the stubborn swimmer and you.

Or consider U.S. immigration policy in the 1930s that denied entry to Jews fleeing Hitler. Would any of us accept an argument from the State Department that said, “We were not responsible for the

deaths of refugees who could not find asylum; it was Hitler. If he hadn't ordered his Final Solution, they would be alive now." Of course, Hitler's responsibility is undeniable. But it's also true that despite Hitler's having given orders for extermination, some of his victims would have survived had they not been barred entry into the United States. Hitler's responsibility does not remove the blood from the hands of the U.S. government.

In the same way, while Biden's moral and political responsibility for the horrors in Gaza and any attendant election loss is indisputable, those who refuse to vote for him in a swing state also bear moral and political responsibility if he loses. Had they voted otherwise, Biden would have won, and we would not have a president committed to undermining democracy, reversing climate change regulations, deporting millions, constraining labor unions, providing the rich more tax benefits, further limiting reproductive rights, and increasing police power.

Two final points.

First, nothing I have said is inconsistent with our continuing to fight Biden's Gaza (and other) policies or supporting the "uncommitted" primary campaigns as a means of pressuring him. Indeed, to the extent that such campaigns encourage Biden to align more with the majority sentiment among voters in favor of a ceasefire, the better his electoral chances in November.

Second, it is true that the risk that third party votes might contribute to a Trump victory is small. But the probability that one's vote will ever matter are always tiny. Consider, however, that the benefits resulting from the Greens getting an extra 100,000 votes are incredibly small, since there is almost no chance that the party will garner close to the 5 percent of the vote that carries future electoral advantages. On the other hand, a swing of fewer than 100,000 votes in a few states in 2000, 2016, or 2020—if appropriately distributed—would have changed the results of those elections. And this year seems like it will be just as close, with the stakes even higher.

The bottom line is that if one believes that a Trump victory would be a disaster, one cannot avoid the moral responsibility in doing what one can to prevent it. And that means voting for Biden in a swing state, despite his horrendous role in Gaza.