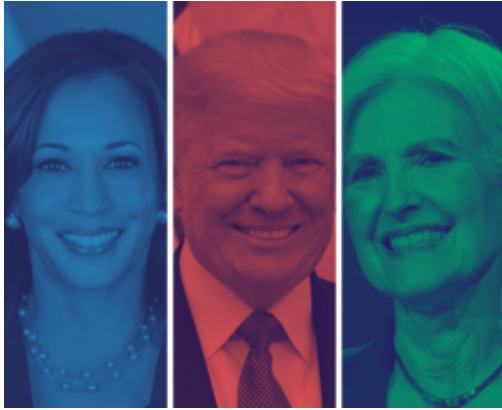


Punishing the Democrats: Is This the Best Way to Oppose a Genocidal War?

written by Stephen R. Shalom | October 23, 2024



Some people on the left make the following argument: we need to vote for a third party in this election, even or especially in swing states, as a way to punish the Democrats for their support for the genocide in Gaza. Only if the Democrats lose the election because of Arab-Muslim-leftist votes will they come to take seriously the concerns of the pro-Palestine movement.

There are, I think, five problems with this argument.

First, one should note the rather inconsistent left support for this argument among Stein voters. Some Stein voters, including Stein herself, go to great pains to argue that the Greens didn't cost Gore the election in 2000 or Clinton the election in 2016, and that a vote for the Greens will not lead to Trump's victory in 2024. For example, Howie Hawkins, who was the Green candidate for president in 2020, wrote the following in endorsing Stein this time around: "The risk that Stein votes will 'spoil' the election for Biden and elect Trump exists, but is very low." But other Stein supporters, such as Kshama Sawant, celebrate the fact that we "have a real opportunity to win something historic. We could deny Kamala Harris the state of Michigan." It will be interesting if Stein garners more votes than Trump's margin in Michigan to watch Sawant cheering and Hawkins insisting her campaign didn't have an effect.

Second, if one takes the "punish the Democrats" argument to its logical conclusion, then one should not only refrain from voting for Harris, but one should actually vote for Trump. After all, each vote for Trump would be twice as effective as a vote for Stein in achieving the goal of causing the Democrats to lose the White House. Now among some Arab Americans and a smaller number of Muslim Americans there is indeed support for voting for Trump, but many of these folks are not progressives. For example, the Muslim mayor of Hamtramck, Michigan, a city with an entirely Muslim city council, endorsed Trump, but he and the city council also supported an ordinance banning the flying of an LGBTQ+ flag on city property. But why do *progressives* balk at voting for Trump, given the logic of their argument?

Is it because they find it morally unacceptable to cast a vote for someone who is more supportive of Israel's genocide than Harris? (Recall that Trump condemned the Biden administration for its microscopically positive suspension of a U.S. arms shipment to Israel, denounced Harris's comments to Netanyahu expressing concern for Gaza civilians as "disrespectful," charged that "Harris has worked to tie Israel's hand behind its back, demanding an immediate ceasefire, always demanding ceasefire," accused Biden of "trying to hold [Netanyahu] back" when "he probably should be doing

the opposite actually,” and, when Biden discouraged Israeli attacks on Iran’s nuclear sites and oil facilities, urged Israel to “hit the nuclear first.”) But morality is not a matter of insisting on personal cleanliness. If it is morally wrong to vote for the greater genocidalist, how can it be right to enable the election of the greater genocidalist?

Is the reason to vote for Stein rather than Trump because a large Stein vote will quantify the protest vote? But if driving up the Green party total is the key, then Stein would have been well advised to spend her time campaigning in safe states where there is no spoiler issue.

A third problem with the punish the Democrats argument is that if the Democrats did feel chastened after losing the 2024 election, what would this mean for Palestine? What would be left of Palestine after four years of Trump’s presidency? What restraints would he impose on Israel? In his last term in office, Trump declared the Israeli settlements to be legal (reversing longstanding US policy, and reversed again by Biden in February 2024), moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, and recognized the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights. Now, Itamar Ben Gvir – Israel’s literally fascist minister of national security, who has publicly endorsed Trump – wants to extend the Nakba to Gaza and the West Bank, annexing much of what remains. Trump, like Israel’s leaders, rejects the notion of two states. So, if there are elections in 2028 and if the Democrats are able to win after all the voter suppression that Trump’s even more supine Supreme Court allows, would the victorious Democrats who now wanted to take seriously the views of Arab and Muslim voters find any Palestinians left to save?

The fourth problem with the punish the Democrats argument is that it assumes that the lesson of Harris’s loss will be self-evident. For example, Peter Daou, sometime campaign manager for Marianne Williamson and Cornel West, declared on social media: “If Kamala Harris loses, I will celebrate. I will celebrate a moment for justice for her Palestinian and Lebanese victims. I will celebrate the humiliating defeat of a genocider and the message it sends the world. Then I’ll oppose Trump as vigorously as I did in his first term.”

But why is Daou so sure that the message that the world will take from Trump’s victory won’t be that a genocider was beaten by a bigger genocider? That someone who ineffectually called for a ceasefire was beaten by someone who opposed calls for a ceasefire? (One also wonders at Daou’s confidence that he will be able to oppose Trump as vigorously as he did in his first term in the face of government repression with far fewer guardrails.)

The fifth problem is that there is no guarantee that a Trump victory will propel the Democrats to take the Arab-Muslim vote seriously. If a few percent of lost votes on their left causes the Democrats to lose the election, they have two options: they could move left to try to pick up additional votes, but at the risk of losing more votes in the center, or they could move even further to the center hoping there are more votes there than on the left. The left is a marginal force in American politics – big enough to affect the result in an evenly divided electorate, but not nearly big enough to compete head on with centrist forces. As long as this is the case, a strategy of torpedoing the Democrats is likely to make the left more irrelevant rather than less so. And if Trump wins, and decides to go forward with his pledge to expand the Muslim ban and bar Gaza refugees, will the Democrats come rushing to the aid of those who they believe cost them the White House?

The historical record lends little support to the claim that when Democrats’ campaigns are sunk by a small leftwing party, the party moves left. On the contrary, the left is vilified, assigning it exclusive blame for the loss that was much more a consequence of Democratic failings. After the narrow 2000 Gore defeat, the Democrats chose a 2004 nominee who had supported the Iraq war (John Kerry). And following the 2016 debacle, the Democrats didn’t turn to Sanders, but to Biden.

Biden administration policies on Gaza are vile. Given the level of U.S. support for Israel's crimes, top officials in the administration are complicit in war crimes, and thus war criminals themselves. But it is not the left's task to carry out retribution. Our goal has to be to try to accomplish the realistic outcome that will minimize human suffering and maximize the chances of future progress. In 2024 that means casting a vote for Harris in swing states to keep out a candidate who is and will be an even greater war criminal.

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