

Some Left Arguments on the Election

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Several left arguments on the U.S. election frankly leave me baffled.

For example, James Robertson writes in *Jacobin* that “It’s better to think of the choice in November as one not between a greater and a lesser evil, but between two different threats.” I don’t get it. Just because threats are different doesn’t mean that one is not more dangerous than the other. If someone is ill and is considering risky surgery, there is no doubt that the threats are different — dying of the disease versus dying on the operating table — but a rational person will want to determine whether one of the threats is worse than the other and choose the lesser threat.

Robertson's survey of the positions of Trump and Clinton is odd because he doesn't actually compare the two. So he's right of course that Clinton will continue her support for the Israeli occupation, but he ignores Trump's call for the construction of *more* Israeli settlements, a position well to the right of any previous president. He's right also that Clinton will oppose BDS, but he ignores the more malignant language on BDS — and Palestine more generally — in the Republican platform. Clinton, Robertson tells us, favored intervention in Libya — but he doesn't tell us that so did Trump, who also wanted to take Libya's oil. Robertson says Clinton would favor deeper involvement in Iraq and Syria, but doesn't mention that Trump like Clinton initially supported the 2003 Iraq war, or that Trump called for 20,000-30,000 troops, promised to “bomb the hell” out of ISIS, urged the targeting of ISIS family members, refused to rule out nuclear weapons against ISIS, denounced Obama for not having announced that “we’re never leaving” Iraq, denounced Obama for lacking courage for not going in with “tremendous force” when Assad used chemical weapons, or asserted that the United States should have taken Iraq's oil. (Ever wonder how one can take a country's oil without long-term occupation? Ever wonder how this might promote peace in the Middle East?) Relations with Iran will get worse under Clinton, says Robertson — probably true, but Robertson ignores Trump's call to abrogate the Iran nuclear deal, which will certainly do more to poison relations with Tehran than anything Clinton might do.

Trump's connections to Russia and admiration for Putin may slow down the new Cold War with Moscow, but other aspects of his foreign policy are incredibly dangerous: his refusal to rule out war with China because he wants to maintain unpredictability, his opposition to nuclear non-proliferation, his charge that Obama has allowed the U.S. military to “atrophy,” and his explanation that the “Trump doctrine is simple. ... It's strength. Nobody is going to mess with us. Our military will be made stronger.”

Robertson argues that “we should expect the national-security state — built up under George W. Bush and significantly expanded under Obama — to be further strengthened with Clinton as commander in chief.” True enough. But Robertson says nothing about Trump in this regard — even though the article he links to (also from *Jacobin*) understands that while Trump is not different in kind from past policies, *he is worse*, “his national security proposals are horrifying — worse than anything we've seen since the Cold War.”

Yes, Clinton has “vocally condemned” whistleblower Edward Snowden, but Robertson doesn’t mention that Trump called for executing the “traitor.”

Robertson sums up that while Trump may be worse on immigration, Islamophobia, and police violence (though, we are told, he may not succeed in any of these), Clinton “would likely” be worse on wars and the national security state. This calculation is based, as noted above, on failing to address Trump’s positions on these issues, but in any event it overlooks many other crucial policy areas, such as the environment, reproductive rights, tax policy, minimum wage, and college tuition.

Left critics of strategic lesser-evil voting often claim that those who point out the dangers of a Trump presidency are fear-mongering. It’s hard to understand this objection. It is the left that has identified the catastrophic risks the world faces in terms of climate change and how short our time is to address this problem before global warming becomes irreversible. Has the climate movement been fear-mongering? If not, then isn’t the huge gap between Trump and Clinton, between Republicans and Democrats, between climate deniers and those committed to increasing the use of renewable energy, worthy of our attention? Leading scientists have warned that Trump’s call to abrogate the Paris Climate Agreement could be catastrophic. Were they fear-mongering? Are they wrong? To be sure, Clinton’s position could be much better than it is. But to deny that the difference here is significant is to either believe that the human species is surely doomed (because there is no chance that we’re going to have eco-socialism in the short term) or that our warnings about the environmental dangers we face have been exaggerated.

Jill Stein was asked “Is the prospect of a Trump presidency equal in your view to that of a Clinton one?” She replied:

I think they both lead to the same place. The lesser evil, the Democrats, certainly have a better public relations campaign, they have better spin. The dangers are less evident, but they’re catastrophic as well. Just look at the policies under Obama on climate change.

So Obama’s climate policies are just better spin than Trump’s would be, better public relations? They lead to the same place? But doesn’t the time frame matter? Trump’s climate denialism will propel us towards disaster while Obama’s and Clinton’s inadequate reforms may give us time to build the movement necessary for our long-term environmental survivability.

Some ask why we should vote our fears, rather than our hopes. For the same reason it generally makes sense to prioritize our fears over our hopes in other realms of life. I *hope* selling off my life savings to bet on the lottery will make me rich; but my fears of the odds of losing leads me to reject that strategy. Shouldn't we always vote for the candidate we like best? Sometimes, yes.

But faced with a choice between two different cancer therapies, the choice I like best is being cured by eating a lot of ice cream. But this would be a foolish choice. Moreover, if I were really voting for the candidate whose views most closely coincided with my own, I'd write-in myself, and other leftists would write-in themselves. But no one does that because we care about consequences; it's not just a matter of feeling good.

Other differences between Trump and Clinton are not as highly consequential as climate change, where the stakes are truly enormous. But if one argues that the other differences are too small to matter, then this means that almost all left activity of the past decade has been irrelevant. For example, the left has pushed \$15 minimum wage campaigns around the country. Were these meaningless? If not, then the difference between the Republican and Democratic platforms in this regard is not meaningless either. Clinton will appoint pro-choice justices to the Supreme Court, while Trump has pledged to select justices in the mold of Antonin Scalia. Is the difference this will

mean for reproductive rights trivial? If so, then abortion rights groups have been wasting their time fighting restrictive laws and policies. We've fought to oppose stop-and-frisk policies, which Trump endorses. Is this just a cosmetic change?

Clearly, Clinton and the Democrats will do nothing without continuing popular pressure, and popular pressure can be (and must be) applied to both Democrats and Republicans. But is there no difference in the susceptibility of Democrats and Republicans to progressive pressure? Let's stipulate that neither Trump nor Clinton personally cares about progressive values. But politics is not a question of the personal whims of individuals, even when they're president. Social forces matter.

Consider the Dakota Access Pipeline that has been opposed by large protests of Native American tribes and environmentalists. Obama's surprise intervention to suspend construction on the project following a court decision that declined to block the pipeline was an important, though limited victory for the social movements. Jill Stein was there at Standing Rock, and that's one of the many reasons that people should vote for her in safe states. But Stein is not going to become president. So the question is which of the only possible people who might actually be elected president this November will be more responsive to movement pressure on this issue going forward? Trump, who dismisses environmental concerns, whose party platform declares: "The Keystone Pipeline has become a symbol of everything wrong with the current Administration's ideological approach. After years of delay, the President killed it to satisfy environmental extremists. We intend to finish that pipeline and others as part of our commitment to North American energy security," and whose chief energy adviser (and likely Energy Secretary) has a major financial stake in the Dakota pipeline? Or Clinton, who — under pressure to be sure — came out against Keystone, who is on record committed to combating climate change, whose party includes Dakota pipeline opponents like Bernie Sanders and one of Clinton's earliest Congressional supporters, Bonnie Watson-Coleman, and whose party platform has as one of its longest sections "Honoring Indigenous Tribal Nations." The labor movement is split on the question, with the AFL-CIO officially favoring construction (the same split as on Keystone). So we can't predict what will happen on the Dakota pipeline, but it would be astounding if a Trump presidency were more conducive to a future Standing Rock victory than a Clinton presidency.

And the same is true across numerous issue areas. Clinton and the Democrats will be bad, but progressive pressure is more likely to get results when aimed at them than when aimed at Trump and the Republicans. It's easier to press someone to do what they promised than to go against their promises. And while the lesson of a campaign against far right policies is that we need liberal policies, the lesson of a campaign against centrist Democrats is that left alternatives are needed.

Some leftists have argued that Clinton is scarier than Trump because her chances of winning are greater: "I am much more afraid of her than Donald Trump if for no other reason that she is certain to be the next president while he is destined to continue building luxury condos and stifling small businesses." Certain? This was written the day that the 538 website gave Clinton a 68-69% chance of winning — a good chance, but far from certain. Has any pundit's predictions — including left pundits — in this election cycle been so accurate that we can speak in certainties? Another leftist tells us not to worry because "Trump's not going to win. For all Hillary Clinton's obvious terrible flaws as a candidate, the big insider cash, the national electoral demographics, and the Electoral College map (just ask Nate Silver and his team of multivariate election predictors at FiveThirtyEight.com) strongly favor her." — even though the Nate Silver estimate the day before this line was published gave Clinton only a 61% chance.

I have no crystal ball, but if one pursues strategic lesser evil voting we don't need to assume omniscience. If the day before the election, it seems Clinton is a shoo-in to win, by all means vote for

Stein. But if it's close and if your vote can make a difference to the outcome, then to be more afraid of Clinton than Trump doesn't make any sense.

Voting for Clinton only if and where it makes a difference doesn't mean "endorsing" her or "supporting" her. It doesn't mean rejecting the left or embracing neoliberalism. It means that one ought to weigh the consequences of one's actions — taking account of the harm that fewer votes would mean for the Green Party and its future prospects versus the harm of allowing a Trump presidency and all that would mean for his many victims — and vote accordingly, while working to oppose repugnant policies and build alternatives.