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Voting Anarchists: An Oxymoron or What?

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While historically anarchists assiduously avoided any involvement with electoral politics, in more recent times, at least in the united states, some anarchists have advocated voting. The arguments these voting anarchists put forward are generally the same as those put forward by other leftists who are unable or unwilling to completely sever their connection to the political process. They argue that voting for their candidate, usually described as a lesser evil and usually (if not always) a Democrat, is necessary to prevent united states aggression against some favored revolutionary state (like sandinista nicaragua), is some sort of self-defense against the more conservative candidate, or is merely better than "apathy," as some describe abstention from voting. While one could argue against voting simply because it rarely, if ever, accomplishes any of the goals its advocates claim it can, there is a more fundamental reason for anarchists to oppose voting: voting in government elections is an inherently authoritarian activity, and authoritarian means never yield libertarian results.

The primary reason why anti-statists should not vote, and in fact should oppose voting, is that the very act of voting is an attempt on the part of voters to delegate to another a power that they could not justly possess themselves. Government is based on coercion. While states of various sorts provide some services and benefits to residents of their jurisdictions, the institution of government also utilizes cops, courts, the military, the IRS, etc, to coercively interfere in the lives of its subjects. Anarchists argue that no one, whether in or out of government should have such power. If this is true, anarchists, who oppose political power and coercion of any sort, cannot consistently advocate voting. Individuals should not have the authority to coerce others, and therefore they should not put themselves in a position to delegate such authority to third parties, which is the essence of voting. While some argue that they vote only in self-defense, the consequence of their voting is that their candidate coerces others who choose not to participate in the process, and therefore this method of self-defense should be unacceptable to anarchists.

Besides being unethical for an anti-authoritarian in and of itself, participation in electoral politics serves to legitimize the whole political process and the existence of government. If people did not vote, the democratic theory of government would lose its legitimacy and politicians would have to justify their rule on the basis of something other than the alleged consent of the governed. This, hopefully, would make the true nature of the state more obvious to the governed. And such a revelation would have the potential to motivate people to challenge, evade, or ignore government interference and coercion.

Even if anarchists could ethically participate in voting, there is one major reason to boycott the process: any candidate anarchists help elect will implement interventionist policies and initiate coercive actions, the results of which will be incompatible with anarchist goals. While voting for a Democrat may arguably make intervention in cuba or nicaragua less likely, it could make matters

worse in israel/palestine or south africa. (Neither the ANC nor the PLO will take a position on the united states presidential election, basically because they support Bush, but are embarrassed to admit this publicly.) Voters claim that a Republican will make things worse economically for working and/or poor people in the united states; however increased taxes, which will certainly be enacted by a Democratic president, will further impoverish the working people from whom they are extorted. Additionally, while people fear a supreme court with a Republican-appointed majority, individual justices are unpredictable (like Sandra Day O'Connor), and Democratic judges are as willing to coercively interfere in our lives as are Republicans.

Besides not yielding the desired results, voting by anarchists entails another weakness. Even if every anarchist in the united states voted in the presidential election, it would not influence the outcome. There are few enough anarchists about that their individual votes are meaningless, since elections are decided by millions of votes. If voting anarchists seriously believe that voting can ethically be done, even by anarchists, then they should consider entering the political process fully and campaigning for presidential candidates. If it's acceptable for them to vote, it's acceptable for their candidates to hold power in a coercive government, and it's acceptable for them to encourage others to vote. I have not seen any anarchists argue for active involvement in the Democratic party, but this is a logical outcome of anarchist arguments for voting. If these people aren't comfortable urging others to vote for their candidates, they should rethink the justifications for their own voting.

Non-voting on the part of anarchists is not a sign of apathy. On the contrary, it is a sign of rejection of the political, i.e., coercive, means of dealing with problems and living our lives. If, as anarchists, we are serious about finding new ways of living and interacting, it would behoove us to stay out of the swamp of electoral politics and maintain our traditional opposition to involvement with electoral politics in any form.