

Non-Voting as an Act of Secession

Guest post by Hans Sherrer. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, 3rd Quarter, 2002.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence made it plain that in America, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive..., it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it,..." The consent theory stated by the Declaration is standard fare in American politics. The Declaration, however, failed to address a very important question: How do individuals express their disapproval of a political regime and/or withdraw their consent from a government that they deem "destructive?"

There are several methods that Americans have used to demonstrate their lack of consent. One way is to renounce allegiance to an existing political order. The colonists in North America seceded from the British empire by successfully waging the Revolutionary War. On the other hand, the eleven Confederate states removed themselves from the federal union from 1861-1865, before being forcibly reintegrated back into the United States.*

A second way someone can express a lack of consent is to move to a different country. This is what several commentators have called "the exit option."* History teaches that the last resort of the individual against tyranny is to escape from its jurisdiction. The Jews left Egypt; the Separatists fled England. History is replete with examples of people who "voted with their feet."

A third way people express a lack of consent is by not voting. Although political pundits might not call it a withdrawal of consent, the fact is that millions upon millions of Americans show their displeasure with their government by not registering for and/or casting a ballot in political elections. Non-voting represents an exit from political society. It is a silent form of "social power" that speaks volumes. Choosing not to vote may be a form of apathy, but it is simultaneously an expression of "what I perceive is best for me."

In other words, millions of non-voters are implicitly stating that voting is a meaningless and unimportant activity, so far as it applies to them and their loved ones in their own lives. After all, government programs, and spending and tax policies will continue regardless of how anyone votes. Furthermore, for those thinking individuals who understand that the government must "get out the vote," the choice not to vote is a form of personal empowerment and a psychologically life-affirming act.* Those men and women who consciously choose not to participate in politics expose the lie behind the myth of "government by consent." They have not consented to anything. In other words, their decision not to vote is a form of personal secession – the form of secession that is most readily available to them.*

This choice is exercised by many millions of Americans because they understand that elections are nothing more than tugs-of-war between tweedledum Democrats and tweedledee Republicans. Both parties seek the mantle of power to impose their agendas on society. Politicians of every political party want to continue the flow of tax money into the treasury and to pass laws allowing the government to increasingly invade the social spheres of daily life. As social commentator, one-time political candidate, and author Gore Vidal once noted: there is really only one political party in this country, and it has two incestuously related branches.*

Whether based on intuition or practical understanding, non-voters realize they only have a subservient role in the political structure described by Vidal. Without money, position or connections, they are disenfranchised from having any meaningful say-so in the government's impact on their lives. Yet, in spite of this handicap, choosing not to vote can have a dramatic and positive effect on society. This is because a government's survival is dependent on having a sufficient number of people grant it the appearance of legitimacy to act and elicit obedience.*

Whether it is an explicit intention or an implicit result, the decision not to vote is a way of decreasing governmental legitimacy. As Vladimir Bukovsky, the Russian dissident put it: "Power rests on nothing other than people's consent to submit, and each person who refuses to submit to tyranny reduces it by one two-hundred-and-fifty-millionth, whereas each who compromises [with it] only increases it."* Finally, there reaches a point at which a government no longer has enough consensus to act under any authority other than the exercise of raw, naked power. Once the mirage of legitimacy is gone, a government must become openly despotic to remain in power. This, in turn, tends to turn even more people away from supporting it, and can put its continued existence in doubt.

This isn't armchair speculation. History records that variations of this scenario have occurred numerous times.* Who would have predicted that the Marco regime would fall from power in the Philippines? Who ever expected that the Communist government in Poland would be succeeded by Solidarity? Who ever thought that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would "splinter apart" in what seemed like the blink of an eye? However, it is usually a surprise to the "experts" when it happens, because it occurs quickly and at a time when a State appears, from the outside, to be at the height of its power.

This phenomenon of seemingly sudden social change is explained by physicist Per Bak's theory of self-organizing criticality.* This theory, for example, explains how millions of grains of sand can methodically be added to a seemingly stable sand pile until a "point of criticality" is reached. At that point, adding only one more grain of sand will trigger an avalanche. Professor Bak's theory has been used to help understand such diverse things as traffic flow and the trading of stocks. It is equally applicable to the delegitimizing impact

any one non-voter can have on a political regime.

It is within the realm of possibility that some day the illegitimacy of the government of the United States might reach the point of criticality. What would happen if impassioned non-voters used the many methods of modern communications to express their ideas and dissatisfaction to others? At first thought it might seem preposterous to seriously consider that government in the United States could become delegitimized. It isn't. As sociologist Sebastian Scheerer has observed: "[T]here has never been a major social transformation in the history of mankind that ha[s] not been looked upon as unrealistic, idiotic, or utopian by the large majority of experts even a few years before the unthinkable became reality."*

For a variety of reasons which the French author, Jacques Ellul, outlined in his book, *The Political Illusion*, non-voters choose to dispel the myth that the voters control the political process.* Instead of debasing themselves and dignifying the elections that have no positive impact on their lives, over a hundred million Americans regularly choose to distance themselves from the voting process and the political regime legitimized by it. They do so by selecting the option of not voting. The non-voters are right, and they are winning every election held in America.

* For citations, [click here](#).