

Should a Liberty Advocate Vote?



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Now that we’ve examined the nature of the state (or government) in detail, and identified it as definitively aggressive and therefore definitively immoral, a number of questions come up. One of the more common within voluntaryist and libertarian circles, is the question of whether one should vote.

To answer this question, we first have to answer what is meant by “should.” The “should” could either refer to a moral determination or a strategic one. First, I will address first the moral consideration. Does voting constitute participation in, or consent for the aggression of the state? Should it always be avoided because it does?

I would contend that morally, there is neither an obligation to vote nor to refrain from voting. The logical basis for characterizing voting as an act of force, or consent to such, has no valid basis... just as the state itself has no valid basis for claiming consent of its governed via participation in a vote. Yes, the people who claim to be our rulers construe the act of voting as consent, but they’re wrong to do so. Voting can not be demonstrably tied to a valid instrument of consent or contract by any specific individual, a point Lysander Spooner made in *No Treason*. His reasoning, while it was specifically directed at the Constitution itself, holds true for voting in general as a supposed act of consent. He says:

It cannot be said that, by voting, a man pledges himself to support the Constitution, unless the act of voting be a perfectly voluntary one on his part. Yet the act of voting cannot properly be called a voluntary one on the part of any very large number of those who do vote. It is rather a measure of necessity imposed upon them by others, than one of their own choice. (No Treason, the Constitution of no Authority)

Spencer's point here is essentially that emergency ethics are in play. Voting creates an inherent "lifeboat scenario" for us all, being constantly at peril of our lives, liberty and property from the ever-present threat of the state. Therefore voting can, at best, be presumed to be the act of an individual using one of an array of available options for self-defense. Furthermore, voting can not be construed as consent to the overall condition of subjection to the state because ballots do not contain a referendum on that situation. They merely represent a choice among various referenda and candidates regarding the implementation of that coercion.

The deeper problem for voluntarists who take stand against voting on the "consent" grounds, is that it is wrong to impose an obligation to refrain that is based on a logically ill-conceived notion of consent to begin with. To do so is also, in the context of libertarianism and voluntarism, deeply hypocritical. One cannot have it both ways. If voting is not "consent" when the state claims it as justification to impose their whim upon anyone who as ever voted (which would indeed be an absurdity) then it is also not "consent" when a person chooses to vote for strategic reasons, or reasons other than their intent to express such consent. Granted, there may be some who walk into voting booths willfully wishing that by very act to express their consent to their general subjection to the determinations of government, however I think it's more reasonable to presume that for most (voluntarist or not) the act is merely an effort to influence those determinations, expecting that they will be operative.

Voting as a Strategy for Liberty

Whatever moral considerations *do* come into play when deciding whether to vote, are the moral considerations surrounding the use of one's time, and the moral obligation to avoid self-deception. I used to take a position that voting is a morally neutral act, however over time I've become more convinced of the importance of these decisions of time usage and being honest with oneself and they are very important. Self-deception is the underlying immoral act that acts as the foundation of all others.

Voting is a failed strategy for society-wide liberty, and will continue to be so. It is clearly not a means, along with all political processes, of accomplishing the ultimate goal of achieving a voluntary society. Aside from the empirical data which abounds for this, It's absurd to think that one can gain control of a coercive mechanism such as the state, and use it to impose voluntarism on society. It is an inherent contradiction, and strategically impossible. The best evidence for this (aside from the fact that tyranny has steadily grown despite the voting process being in place) is that voting is the process that the *state itself* permits us to use to influence its actions. If it was likely to inhibit them or reduce their power, the individuals labeled government wouldn't allow it to continue!

This doesn't mean that there is never anything that can be improved by voting and other

forms of state-approved participation. Under the right alignment of circumstances a vote or other participatory effort may indeed lead to a reduction of the individual instances of force brought to bear by the state. Each act of aggression is a moral evil, and therefore each reduction of that force even by means of voting must be viewed as a positive. Therefore it's unwise to completely rule out the use of voting and other participatory efforts.

Next week I will discuss some effective, non-voting forms of working toward societal liberty, in terms of both immediate damage control and the long-term goal of eliminating its perception of legitimacy.