

Should Voluntaryists Vote?

Guest post by Spencer Morgan.

Earlier this week, I was asked a question by a local libertarian who is taking a close look at the philosophy of voluntaryism. His question as follows:

“Should voluntaryists vote? The issue, as I see it, is that on the one hand, voting could be construed as a tacit recognition of the legitimacy of the state.”

To answer this question, we first have to answer what is meant by “should.” The term could either convey a moral consideration or a strategic one. I will address first the moral consideration, or the idea that voting constitutes participation in or consent to coercion, and should *always* be avoided because of its nature as such.

I would contend that morally, there is neither an obligation to vote nor to refrain therefrom. 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 the government based on those individuals’ participation in a vote. Yes, the people who claim to be our rulers construe it as such, but they’re wrong to do so as voting can not be documentably tied to a valid instrument of consent by any specific individual, a point Spooner made in “No Treason.” His reasoning, while it was specifically directed at the Constitution itself as a valid instrument, holds true for voting in general as an act of consent;

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, and as such 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 coercive 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 voluntaryists who take a principled stand against voting is that it's wrong to impose an obligation to refrain that is based on a logically ill-conceived notion of consent. To do so is also, in the context of libertarianism and voluntaryism, 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 voluntaryist chooses to vote for strategic reasons.**

Having thoroughly addressed the principled or moral question, I'll move on to the strategic answer to the question "should voluntaryists vote."

Strategically, voting is a failed strategy and has always been destined inherently to be such. 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 voluntaryism on society. It's 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 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!

For overall strategic value, especially from a long-term perspective, tactics like non-compliance, evasive market transactions (see Agorism) and obstructive actions in court (see Jury Nullification) hold a much greater potential and effort to reward ratio. These approaches, even when exercised by a dedicated and vocal minority, can cripple the otherwise unimpeded flow of the state's enforcement of unjust edicts at local levels. For more details and examples of this strategy in action, I'd recommend the Free Keene YouTube channel.

That isn't to say 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 the reduction of the individual instances of force brought to bear against certain humans. Since any reduction of that force must be viewed as a positive, it's unwise to completely rule out the use of voting and other participatory efforts.

Now the other question that is probably going to arise after saying all of this is;

“What about Ron Paul’s candidacy?”

Ron Paul’s greatest value is as an instrument for exposure to a larger philosophical tradition. He’s often referred to as the “gateway drug” for liberty. Sure, if he does get elected he could, as he shows every indication of being disposed to do, reduce the instances of coercion against people undertaken by the state. **Putting together mass movements every four years just to have a possibility at getting someone who won’t increase the tyranny, much less pull together the sweeping consensus required for congressional change to begin rolling it all back, is *not* going to be how a voluntary society or any prevailing condition of greater liberty is achieved.**

Historically it is usually external pressure and economic reality that collapses these huge parasitic empires, and that’s ultimately the opportunity I anticipate. That’s why it’s critical to be doing the mass education and networking that we are now. When that window of opportunity comes, things will get very fluid. Voluntaryists are already making a difference to how that will go with our efforts now, even though most reject our ideas. We’re “shifting the window” of acceptable ideas. Convincing someone in an immediate conversation is rare and antithetical to human nature, so don’t measure your efforts by that goal. We’re planting seeds, because if the philosophical groundwork isn’t laid in the meantime, the inevitable collapse of unsound systems of government will just lead to demands for new forms of enslavement.