

Voting: Don't Buy the Guilt Trips

“Elections have consequences,” then-president Barack Obama reminded House Minority Whip Eric Cantor in 2009. Obama was correct. Elections do have consequences.

On the other hand, those consequences aren't necessarily predictable. As an old saw concerning the 1964 presidential election went, “I was told that if I voted for Goldwater we'd end up in a war in Vietnam. And I did vote for Goldwater. And we did end up in a war in Vietnam.”

As the 2022 midterm campaigns heat up, we'll no doubt find ourselves subjected to the usual “MOST IMPORTANT ELECTION IN HISTORY! GET OUT AND VOTE!” campaigns. Not to mention the “dirty hands” counter-argument from some radicals that voting is immoral because it props up a bad system: If you vote you have no grounds for complaint; since you willingly participated in that system, the outcomes are on you, not on non-voters.

Yes, elections have consequences. Your vote, on the other hand, mostly doesn't.

First of all, the chance that your vote will materially affect the outcome of any election of significant size — for example, that your vote will be the one vote that puts your presidential candidate over the top in Florida, or that Florida will then cast the decisive electoral votes, let alone both — is almost nil. You're more likely to buy the single winning Powerball ticket for a record-high jackpot.

Secondly, even were that to happen, it's unlikely that you'd get the results you expected from the victory of the candidate you chose.

Voting is a weird variant of the “Trolley Problem,” an ethical thought experiment: An evildoer has tied three people to one set of trolley tracks, and one person to another set. You're at the lever controlling which set of tracks the trolley goes down. If you throw the lever, the trolley kills the one person. If you don't, it kills the three people.

In the voting version of the “Trolley Problem,” your options are:

To throw the lever to the left (vote Democratic).

To throw the lever to the right (vote Republican).

To put a sticky note on the lever (bearing the name of a third party or independent candidate).

Or to do nothing.

As to outcomes, you have no idea how many people are tied to which set of tracks, or how many of them will be killed or injured, or in what ways.

And you also know that there are millions of other voters/levers and that what you do with YOUR lever is unlikely to have any real effect on the outcome.

There's no particularly compelling argument for or against voting. We should just treat voting as what it actually is.

So, what is voting?

Voting is speech.

It's a statement of your beliefs.

Ditto non-voting, if done with intent to express unwillingness to affirm the system's legitimacy.

Voting is neither a moral duty nor a moral crime.

Don't let anyone tell you that you must, or mustn't, vote. That decision is, and should be recognized as, a matter of personal preference.