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Reflections on Chomsky's Voting Strategy: Why The Democratic Party Can't Be Saved



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“There are two issues. One is a kind of moral issue: do you vote against the greater evil if you don't happen to like the other candidate? The answer to that is yes. If you have any moral understanding, you want to keep the greater evil out. Second is a factual question:

how do Trump and Clinton compare? I think they're very different. I didn't like Clinton at all, but her positions are much better than Trump's on every issue I can think of."

— Noam Chomsky

"If not me, who? If not now, when?"

— Emma Watson

Ok, yes, the second quote was originally from Hillel the Elder, but Watson made it famous and will factor in later.

First to Noam Chomsky. Noam Chomsky is too smart to ever lie. But maybe just a little too smart to have hope. Regardless, he is one of the great figures of our lifetimes.

Evaluating Chomsky's opinions on lesser evil voting is difficult because he seems to be right on just about everything else. I am not one of the people on the left who sees no difference between the two parties. Trump is especially bad. The difference between the two parties is obviously great enough where one would be right to commit their night to keeping the Republicans out, no matter how much one might disagree with the Democrats. The act of voting is not always that easy in our so-called democracy however. Greg Palast has been keeping track of the recent voter purges in the United States. Things were especially bleak in Georgia, as the GOP purged 1 in 10 voters! How outrageous. Palast notes the racism of the purging method crosscheck: 1 in 6 Latinos are on the crosscheck lists, 1 in 9 blacks are. This is a strategic move. Republicans know they can count on dumbed down whites to vote them in based on racial identity alone.

How else does the dreadful GOP keep on winning? Mitch McConnell just blamed the federal deficit on Medicare, Social Security and Medicaid. Polls show the vast majority of Americans want to keep these programs—yet goons like McConnell continue to get elected. Voter suppression, absurd campaign spending, mass disinformation and a "deplorable", dumbed down and bigoted population are the only things the Republicans have going for them.

That is besides their secret weapon: a sham 'resistance' party that is most focused on compromise and corporate backing rather than the will of the people.

Still, there remain differences between the two corporate parties, so I also agree with the moral issue Chomsky raises. Not "liking" a Democrat is no reason not to vote for them. Doing so puts one's own feelings above the well-being of working class people across the globe. And I do see this is as a problem on the left sometimes. We are sometimes most motivated by a hatred of Democrats, for whatever reason. Maybe it is a rebellion against liberalism. Maybe it is because it makes us sound ahead of the curve. Maybe it is because

we have too much faith in the Democrats and see them as a friend that is letting us down. Regardless, I find the most healthy thing to do is to be honest about it. The Democrats are really bad and liberalism doesn't cut it most of the time but they remain far better than Republicans.

But here I must begin my disagreement with Chomsky. He seems to identify just a small portion of the country who feels this way (even if every single one of them has a blog). The assumption that most third party voters or non-voters are acting without moral or factual guidance is simply not true. There is a pragmatism to not voting for the Democrats. Anyone would admit (Chomsky included) that both parties have gotten far worse and that the strategy of lesser evil voting has not prevented this from happening. If simply voting for the lesser evil is our only voting principle then we rely solely on relativity. There are no lines drawn in the sand for what we feel is right and wrong.

But to Chomsky's credit he has a very reasonable response to this as well. I'm sure he would recognize that radicalism is most often rational and moral. He also might agree with me that the radicals are the only rational and moral people in our political system. But Chomsky argues that electoral politics are not often the place where radical change occurs. W.E.B. Du Bois had a similar understanding when he called voting an act of self-defense. There are things you can control in the outcomes of elections. And Chomsky believes that you should control these outcomes. To use another famous quote from Reinhold Niebuhr: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

It is hard to refute. A vote for a third party in most parts of the country is simply a protest vote that takes the voter out of any likely outcomes for the particular election. A vote for nobody is an even bigger protest with even less likely chance of impacting the election results in a positive way. The voting system is so rigged that any decent candidates are simply left out of the process and would be sabotaged if they figured out a way in (note Bernie Sanders, who I will have some harsh words for later).

Chomsky argues that we shouldn't be so focused on electoral politics. It is far more important to be engaged citizens the rest of the year. We are in full agreement here. I also would concur that while lesser evil voting surely hasn't made either party any better, it has saved us from some Republicans, which is a godsend.

Noam Chomsky then is partly correct I think. Radical politics are necessary. Electoral politics don't give us radical outcomes at this point in time. Better results in a specific election can be achieved by voting for a lesser evil.

But I must break from Chomsky. I understand that he believes voting can and should be separated from being a radical in today's dark times. But for better or worse, voting remains a huge part of our political culture. Advocating for a lesser evil undermines radical candidates, plain and simple. It even undermines not-so-radical candidates who could significantly change America for the better.

I am talking here about the Bernie Sanders campaign. Bernie ultimately had the same attitude as Chomsky did about elections. Presenting big and exciting ideas is ok, but it is impossible to actually get them to happen via electoral politics. When Bernie Sanders endorsed Hillary Clinton he undermined the entire movement he created. One could argue that the cynical endorsement may have defeated Donald Trump (oops). But Bernie's surrender also had other rational consequences besides potentially keeping the far greater evil Donald Trump out of office. One rational consequence was that the Sanders movement was smothered—a consequence that without question outweighed the difference between Clinton and Trump.

Refusing to believe that electoral politics can and should be a place for radical politics ignores popular movements across the world, particularly in South America (movements of course which the imperialist Bernie Sanders would undermine). Chomsky noted that Bernie Sanders' success was by far the most remarkable thing to happen in the 2016 election. And he was right. A grumpy unknown old guy captured an entire country's imagination with no money, no press support, no support from his political party and really no allies in popular culture or discourse whatsoever. As Chomsky would say, remarkable.

Clearly then the American public is more radical than we think. And clearly this portion of the country often is disengaged from electoral politics. By giving up on his movement before it really started, Bernie Sanders guaranteed that a radical outcome in electoral politics was not possible. He could have tried and seen what happened, but he didn't.

I remember a Noam Chomsky interview on *Democracy Now!* during the Democratic Party primaries. Amy Goodman asked him who he favored and he said Bernie Sanders in the primary. But he also made sure to note that he would support Clinton in the general election if she beat Sanders in the primary. This seemed like an unnecessary early endorsement. Sanders too made sure to put out any fires before they started, opting never to criticize Clinton during the primaries. Was it old fashioned chivalry that held these men back or was it something more severe?

One really has to ask Mr. Chomsky (who calls himself a radical) and Mr. Sanders (who calls himself a revolutionary), what exactly were the goals of the Sanders campaign? Was the goal ever, at any point in time, to actually gain power? Because now we see the Sanders-backed candidates mostly getting crushed in the 2018 midterms. And it's because they're outspent. And Sanders will complain, Chomsky will complain, but why would the 1% care?

There is a belief here that radical politics will never be possible in the United States. Sanders wasn't even a radical! He was a mad dog imperialist with some reform capitalism on the brain. But clearly Chomsky and Sanders thought this was way too left for the average American!

The reason why no one votes in America is not because we are all a bunch of snobs. It's because people get invested in politics, or invested in anything, when something good can come out of it. Sanders, a relatively sane but complicit Democrat, was such a breath of fresh air that millions came out to organize, vote and knock doors.

Clearly though, Mr. Sanders was an atheist preacher. Night after night he told his congregation how God would save them all. Yet the first night a storm came, Mr. Sanders ran for his bunker.

There is strategy behind this. But it's a strategy that assumes that the best case scenario is a win for the Democrats. If this is only a strategic move, so be it. But it shows that the Sanders movement was far behind, not ahead of, the American populace who is ready for a radical change and done with the duopoly status quo.

What are to make of an anarchist named Noam who believes that the Democrats can and should be negotiated with? I am not so much questioning Chomsky's politics, which I'm sure are left of mine. I'm more scratching my head at his strategy of electing Democrats with one hand and advocating for radical change on the other.

Yes, you can believe that all government officials will be repressive by nature and that change must come from the people (although once again, the progressive government figures in South America clearly contradict this). Yet for the people to gain power we must also have some say over who runs the government. How likely would a Trump or a Clinton be to listen to progressive populace when the 1% finances their way into office?

For a politician to truly be accountable to the people, they must be elected by the people, not by the 1%. It is clear as day that the duopoly parties, as currently constructed, are not responding to the needs of the people. Yet somehow Sanders believes the best strategy for

changing this is some sort of cultural shift in talking points that includes socialism. The majority of my generation *believes* in socialism, but that doesn't mean it will happen.

Sanders was able to take advantage of popular sentiments and run a fantastic, if ultimately self-sabotaging, campaign. He quickly shuttled these sentiments back into the Democratic Party "big tent". Such a strategy halts positive change in its tracks. The Democratic Party takes up space not as an ideological institution (because no one believes their crap anymore) but as an institution of governance. That is why the Chomsky strategy of changing ideology through positive movements that don't take government power (Sanders) is so backwards.

The problem isn't that people aren't radical. Most are so exploited they would easily take up a chance for revolution before Chomsky/Sanders. The problem isn't ideology. The problem is power. And the Democrats and Republicans own all the power despite no one agreeing with anything they do. Seriously, look at Congress's approval rating. It's in the single digits in many polls. To believe the Sanders movement was a success would be to assume that working people wouldn't have a critique of capitalism on their own (maybe not in those words, but the half of the country living paycheck to paycheck no doubt has a critique of the system). Assuming Sanders was a success also entails a blindness to how power works. No one is giving up power because people complain.

In this country, politics change through elections. Revolutions (if Sanders even knows what that word means) are a last resort and a most likely painful resort. If this is what it takes, so be it. But we never came close to finding out. Cry no tears though for Sanders' blindness. His politics were never revolutionary, so why would his strategy be?

Now it is clear that lesser evil voting is not the only thing that got us here. Democrats and Republicans don't simply get worse because of how we vote. To borrow from Bernie Sanders, the reason is longer hours for lower wages. The people are less secure in their jobs, have less time and energy for politics and are more disconnected from each other in the age of technology. The press is corrupted, wealth has been consolidated and the pushback against the 1960s is real. No matter who we voted for over the last half-decade, we may not have stopped what was happening.

Still, if electoral politics makes any impact, we should address it. To me it seems impossible to separate electoral politics from radical politics. Because the question one really should have is this: what are we waiting for? Yes, at this point in time, electing anyone on the left seems impossible. And yes, it seems absolutely hopeless in the near future. But these things can change fast. A movement can be ignited. And if we are in the

mindset of stopping Republicans when this movement comes along we will simply miss our moment. If we feel the need to suppress our hope for something better because we fear something worse, who have we become?

Now this is where it all gets a little theoretical and impractical. I don't want to lose anybody here. The odds are against us, certainly. But this is a culture that relies on feelings, not rational arguments. Politics has always run this way actually. This is the central mistake to the liberal's strategy.

Working people are far more rational than Sanders, Chomsky, etc. There is a clear recognition that Democrats and politics and we know it are not giving concrete changes for the better. Only a hyper-rationality totally divorced from reality could continue to blind itself to the living reality of most people. It is rational to dump the Democrats now. It is emotional to scold people abandoned by them for being too idealistic. It is idealistic to believe in the Democrats when they continue to bring us backwards. It is a far more level-headed decision to invest in something that will change the lives of you and your loved ones for the better. Even if that something doesn't exist yet, it's a better investment. And abandoning that change before it even starts—how rational is that?

Speaking of rational, Chomsky would do well to listen to the most effective political figure of our times—the great Ralph Nader. Nader is as close to a one man revolution as they come. He has spent years engaging in real politics with real power—never losing sight of strategy and purpose. Nader is so level-headed, one almost laughs with joy upon hearing him! The rest of the political class is reactionary and ahistorical.

So when Nader was asked about third party voting on his radio show the other week, he gave a response far less emotional than Chomsky's scoldings! He simply pointed to the historical effectiveness of third parties. He said how grateful he was that people voted for anti-slavery, women's suffrage and industrial workers parties when they were unpopular. Franklin D. Roosevelt, perhaps the most progressive President in U.S. history, was pushed to the left by third parties, Nader explains. In progressive moments in our country there was a viable third party force, capable of taking away votes from the Democrats. Therefore, Democrats had to adopt some of the platforms purposed.

What a rational approach in comparison to [sheepdog](#) Bernie Sanders! If Democrats know you are going to roll over, they will never take you seriously! This is the exact reason why Republicans never negotiate with Democrats. Dems always cave.

It's sad that people blame Ralph for George W. Bush when he's one of the only people who has seriously fought Republicans. Sometimes I feel like we are enlisted to represent

the Democrats, not the other way around. I see more complaints this time of year about third party people than the Democrats themselves. If Democrats want people to vote for them, they should show us something. Why is it the people's job to prove themselves to the Democrats?

Ralph (it's hard to find a more satisfying first name than Noam, but I think Ralph might get the cake) Nader recognizes that it is a small amount of the population (he says only 1%) being politically engaged that will change society. He knows many people may be under a propaganda glaze or inactivity spell, but Ralph argues that the people know what's up. Third party movements simply are movements that come from the ground up and therefore represent a large portion of the population's interest. Whether or not the third parties get the necessary funds to compete in an election, they can prove to the Democrats that there are votes to be gained on the left.

There is a needless debate over whether to overthrow the Democratic Party from the inside or the outside. Both approaches will be necessary. There are still great people in the Democratic Party, especially at the local level. These people are fully worth supporting and organizing for, but that is in spite of their party affiliation, not because of it. If a candidate with similar characteristics is outside of the Democratic Party, that's great too.

Too often the left falls into a cult like trance of purity and scapegoating in its obsession over the Democratic Party. There are decent people in government and the left should not be so cynical about government as a whole in my opinion. Donald Trump's purging of the government agencies shows why we should be inclined to trust the public sector a whole lot more than the private sector. Donald Trump ran a campaign on the idea of "it's all corrupt" and "drain the swamp". Unless we can recognize that government can, is, and will be a force for good, we are no different than the cynical capitalist Trump.

That being said the Democratic Party is falling fast to corporate power and there is no hope to save the organization. If the Democratic Party ever meant something, count Bill Clinton, not Donald Trump, as the worst President this country has ever seen.

Bernie Sanders was right to originally run as a Democrat. This strategic play got him more coverage and credibility than other independent voices—and he took advantage. Of course the mainstream media barely covered Sanders, and were extremely unfair to him when they did, but the Democrat label helped him.

This only works to a point though. When the Party completely undermines its own candidates because they don't fit the corporate interests of the company, it is time to defeat this force from the outside. Continuing business as usual as if you weren't cheated is as

dishonest as it is strategically flawed. Sanders looked pathetic as he raised arms with Hillary Clinton in a unity vote. It made no sense and nobody fell for it.

This begs the question: is it even possible for the Democratic Party to be progressive? At the Presidential level, certainly not. Increasingly across the country the answer is turning from a small chance of progressive politics to an absolute no. The Democrats continue to become more and more indebted to corporate interests, and none of these people are worth coming close to, let alone supporting. Yet, there are good people in the Democratic Party, it just remains a more and more difficult task to be a good person within that framework.

So, how to defeat this trend? Is it really to simply bring the Party to the left through rigged primaries? Not only are the progressives sabotaged by their own party, their loss inevitably leads to the sentiments of the progressives staying within the Party (and therefore the votes, time, money and resources of their supporters).

This would be fine, if it actually worked. But as long as the Party is confident that progressives will stay with them no matter what, why would they ever change? Remember the marvelous Ralph Nader saying that it was third party pressure that really made some of the great progressive moves of Democrats over the years, whether that be ending slavery, giving women the vote, or The New Deal.

This foolish strategy of sticking with the Democrats no matter what is being abandoned though. And it's mostly, I'm proud to say by younger people. Only 28% of people aged 18-29 said they were certain they were voting this midterm election, according to a poll by Vox. Compare that to 74% of Seniors in the same poll. There is of course the real consequences of this. Seniors vote Republican and keep them in office.

However, would we really feel more secure about our future if the younger people were voting at the same clip? Isn't it at least a sign of hope that young people are disillusioned enough not to believe in either corporate party?

And if the Democrats cared, they would try to win over this demographic. But young people remain far too left for them to even try. Note the Clinton campaign's strategy of winning over suburban Republicans before even going near working class or young Democrats of the Sanders variety.

Now, the not voting is a good sign, but it's not a sufficient action. If one is going to boycott the Democrats (a perfectly worthy endeavor), an alternative must be put in place. Without this, we are left with the only politically active people being conservative Democrats and even more conservative Republicans.

Still, the rationale for abandoning Democrats is spot on, and a sign of hope. The Democrats haven't come close to solving the mass inequality, the coming climate change apocalypse, the permanent war economy, the closing of local businesses and schools, the diabolical prison system or any other of the major problems of our times.

The mainstream talking heads naturally view abandoning the Democrats as the sign of despair. They are incapable of seeing it any other way. It is their party, after all. But I disagree. It's a sign that we smell bullshit, and we aren't going to take it anymore. How to actually defeat the corporate duopoly is a much grander challenge though, and if the Sanders campaign taught us anything, it is that symbolism and dissatisfaction with the status quo does nothing on its own.

Maybe this is giving the Democrats too much credit, but at their best the Democrats represent a sort of benchmark for how evil the Republicans can become. For the duopoly sham to work, differences between the two parties need to be established. As the left loses power and the Democrats feel no need to listen to it, they can lower the bar. This gives the Republicans permission to lower their bar even further, which of course they will. That is why I always have questioned the idea that a vote for a regressive Democrat is a vote against an even more regressive Republican.

In short, the reason that the duopoly stays as conservative as it is to not because too many people vote third party. It's precisely the opposite. Not nearly enough do. Too many people throw up their hands and say "there's no difference" and too many people throw up their hands and say "we can do better than a Democrat". This sort of defeatism is exactly what leaves the duopoly comfortable enough to negotiate policy with each other and their corporate masters, rather than the people they represent.

And it's not like the Democrats really need our votes. They do not deal with voter suppression and gerrymandering because they want a fair fight with Republicans. They know Republicans need to cheat to keep up with them and they let them do it. Half the country already doesn't vote. The idea that it all comes down to a few lefties suiting up for the Democrats is completely artificial.

It also is a battle at the margins. The Green Party is really a very small party at the moment. The much bigger party is the party of people who don't vote because they see no reason to. Organize even a tenth of this demographic to come out and vote for a third option, and you would have something the major parties would have to negotiate with.

For now, they have us on a loop. Republicans can be home for your dumb, mean and rich. Democrats can be home for everyone else. Republicans can cheat to keep up, as long as

they stay close, and as long as they remain even more awful than the Democrats. Resistance within the Democrat Party will be politely smothered and alluded to, but never taken seriously because they know no one is leaving and they know you have no place to go. Meanwhile both parties will get more and more corporate, but what can you do?

The challenge then is this: build a tent outside of the duopoly, capable of threatening the lesser evil agreement between the Democrats, Republicans and corporate masters. If need be, this tent must be willing to sacrifice short term losses for long term gains. The strategy of defensive short term loss after defensive short term loss leads to, rather than prevents the collapse of civil society and the birth of fascism a.k.a. the creep (respectfully) known as Mr. Cheeto-in-Chief.

There it is. A rational case for third parties! But let's return to emotion. It's not that rationality and education and science aren't necessary (Donald Trump proves that our society needs these things). But we should also acknowledge that our professional class is completely out of touch. Our society is so divided and segregated that most of the talking heads and politicians really have no idea what is going on in the country. Tucked away into our own bubbles of comfort, the professional class loses all sense of the people. This is why Nader, who hits the ground running everyday, seems almost singular in his accuracy and effectiveness, at least among mainstream figures. With that in mind, let's continue to why Trump works and Democrats remain, despite being far less hideous, no more appealing.

Liberals believe that convincing people that climate change is real will change how they vote. My first question is this: how dumb do you liberals think people are? People have eyes. Climate change happens. Also, we are not all going to die from Mexicans or aliens or whatever. But yeah, these things work because they are about feelings. Trump lies. Everyone knows it. Some people care, and some people don't. Trump, among other things, was a rebellion against the rational politics. He was a rebellion against the automation of political discourse and human interaction. He was the rebellion against the intellectual severity of the Democrats and the morally bankrupt intellectual class.

I would never place Noam Chomsky in this class. He's a great person and he has never lost sight of the people's struggle. But I think he overestimates the power of rational thought. Minds are always changed through inspiration. The people who changed the world radically for the better were not just great thinkers, but great dreamers. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired because he had a vision. The vision never came but we tried like

hell to get there. No one is ever going to be inspired or motivated by “they’re not Republicans”.

Ultimately it is a privileging of the intellectual that blinds intellectuals to radical change. Through changing minds, it can be said, we can inspire greatness. How has that worked out for the intellectuals themselves? The battle over power will be won by winning over the hearts. For no sacrifice for the greater good has ever been rational, it has always been necessary. What will inspire the overworked and underpaid to risk their livelihoods? It won’t be an intellectual argument about capitalism, it will be a real chance at radical change for the better. This is why Democrats never get votes. They never come through. So why would someone waste time and money they don’t have in helping them get power?

What the liberal professional class needs to do is embrace the magic again. If you want to leave traditional religion behind, fine. But you have to find some purpose, some vision, that will ignite the people. If you don’t believe in something greater than we have now you aren’t going to motivate or inspire anyone else.

This is why I used the quote from the politically active Emma Watson, who is most famous for her role as the witch Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series. In the massively popular fantasy series there are four houses that a witch or wizard can be sorted into. Gryffindor is for the brave, Hufflepuff is for the kind, Ravenclaw is for the smart, and Slytherin is for the cunning. The four houses work as a useful metaphor for this country. Democrats and Republicans actually account for only a quarter of the country each, while Independents account for half.

Republicans are clearly Slytherin. They are evil and selfish and morally bankrupt. The liberals then are Ravenclaw, for they believe that if we are rational, all our problems will be solved. Ultimately this movement fails as soon as Republicans play to people’s anxieties and fears. No one except for intellectuals likes to be numb and devoid of feeling. The Bernie movement is Hufflepuff, for they believe in a kinder and gentler Scandinavia model. Ultimately this movement has no bite and is stopped when the big boys come out to play. Then there are the Gryffindors. This is the only house that can actually defeat the Slytherins, led by Don Voldemort. One can rationalize with evil people and save a few lives, one can negotiate with evil people and save a few lives. But the only way to defeat evil is with courage.

Now Hermione Granger was a fascinating character because she was the smartest person in the book. I would argue that she was even smarter than the Chomsky-like Albus

Dumbledore, but that's a debate for a different time. Everyone was surprised that she ended up in Gryffindor, because she was the most suited for Ravenclaw. But the Sorting Hat who decides such things says that ultimately the choice is yours.