

Anarchism & the Vote

Abstention from voting is a fundamental anarchist principle. Does it remain an absolute today?

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Emma Goldman is reputed to have said, “If voting could change things, they’d make it illegal.” Contempt for the franchise permeates anarchism, so that anarchists who favor participating in state elections are both in the minority and on the defensive.

This essay places the struggle for Votes for Women in the context of anarchist aspirations for radical social transformation, and also reconsiders the anarchist rejection of voting in contemporary times. A century after “The Great Reform,” I suggest we reformulate Goldman’s logic: perhaps authorities try so hard to make voting illegal because it could actually change things.

Anarchist feminism during the suffrage movement

While Goldman and her comrades rejected women’s suffrage in favor of revolutionary anarchism, they also put aside their differences about the vote to create coalitions around other issues. Anarchist women worked with suffrage reformers on specific campaigns, including fighting for birth control, organizing against World War I, and working to free political prisoners.

Suffrage was a large and diverse movement, not an existing right for women. The decision that anarchist women faced, and unanimously answered in the negative, was whether they should work to acquire the vote, not simply whether they should cast a ballot. English anarchist Rose Witcop expressed the common position: she wrote in *Voice of Labor* that she admired suffragists’ bravery but denied that parliamentary reform could help working people. Anarchist women took pains to distinguish themselves from patriarchal opponents of women’s suffrage. Goldman saw herself as a better feminist, a more radical feminist, than the suffragists. In a letter from prison to her niece Stella Ballantine on April 3, 1919, Goldman characterized her own feminism as “a broader and deeper] point [of view]” than the suffragists who fixated on the vote and neglected the social question.

Anarchist women were also quick to ridicule claims that women would purify government and clean up its excesses, a task Goldman joked would take “supernatural powers.” Anarchist women were generally incensed by notions that chastity and moral virtue were the realm of women, seeing purity as merely the flip side of vice and “bad women” as the needed patriarchal double of “good women.”

British anarchist Dora Marsden mocked “pure” women for being more fascinated with vice than the sinners themselves: “The vicious amuse themselves by imagining and thereafter ‘touching’; the ‘pure’ prolong the excitement by imagining and thereafter refraining. Fundamentally, there is nothing to choose between them.”

Drawing upon British anarchist Paddy Vipond’s overview of anarchist objections to voting, I see four major, overlapping arguments framing anarchist women’s views of suffrage:

The bottom line is that suffrage won't work: it won't achieve a free and just society. Quoting Thoreau, Goldman declared, "Even voting for the right thing is doing nothing for it." Governmental democracy is merely a facade for the real power of the owning class. The only real leverage that working people have is their labor power.

The limited effectiveness of suffrage is made more nefarious by the duplicity of the electoral process. The game is rigged. Chicago anarchist Lucy Parsons insists that our duly elected representatives, anchored to the interests of the wealthy, are actually "corruptionists playing their tricks." People of integrity might resist corruption, Goldman argued, but would still be "helpless to exert the slightest influence on behalf of labor."

The third point has to do with the legitimacy of representation. Even if the election process were scrupulously honest, anarchists remain convinced that representative government is itself anti-democratic. Only direct democracy is real democracy: workers should control their workplaces; students and teachers should control their schools; children and adults should have equal power and status in families. Suffrage does the work of legitimization on a very personal level: voting legitimizes the system of representative government by habituating us to the state. Even if we go into the voting booth skeptical about the system, the act of voting, the process of learning about the candidates and the issues, following the results, discussing them with others—these are not without consequence. They prepare us to tacitly accept the authority structures rather than to challenge them.

The fourth objection to suffrage, from an anarchist perspective, is the cost in time and attention needed to educate oneself about issues and cast a ballot. Anarchists have typically insisted that we should better spend our time on actions that hold greater promise to change the world. Suffrage struggles siphon precious political energy into dead-end campaigns. This was one of the strongest concerns of the anarchist women 100 years ago, because most of them were full-time activists in the anarchist movement. The suffrage movement was a competitor for activists' limited resources.

Revisiting voting today

Where does this leave us, today? Taking seriously anarchist convictions that voting in representative democracies is a crooked system that protects capitalism, robs us of our desire for true self government, and may distract us from more important struggles, what is left to say about anarchism and voting?

Given that last century's anarchists were reacting to the suffrage movement rather than to a relatively settled state institution, contemporary questions about whether anarchists should vote today are in a different context than earlier questions about whether anarchist women should work for the vote. Today's authorities often go to great lengths to discourage voting, particularly by youth, people of color, and ex-felons, so it behooves anarchists to ask why. Perhaps their alarm should be our incentive.

The few anarchists who have defended voting have often done so on the grounds that it can offer a small step in the direction of needed change. Contemporary British anarchist Paddy Vipond calls voting "the easiest tool to utilize in the anarchist arsenal" in order to take "a small step in the right direction."

Yet, what does it mean, politically, to take a step? The step image suggests progression toward a shared goal, but with a smaller stride. Yet anarchists are virtually unanimous that anarchy is a practice that rises up out of grassroots self-organizing. It cannot be created from the top, down. Anarchists give enormous energy to creating local, grassroots initiatives, including bookstores, cafes, publications, theaters, art venues, and autonomous communities, because anarchy emerges out of shared organizing. Perhaps a better metaphor for voting is not a small step toward a distant radical goal but a posture of defense: defending ourselves against the worst options by voting for the less-bad options. This is more like an act of self-preservation than it is like taking a step down a shared road.

By this view, voting in state elections offers not a step toward anarchism but a chance at what contemporary anarchist Ryan Conrad calls "harm reduction": we want to stop the worst from happening. To expect this strategy to actually lead, even by a small increment, to an anarchist society is unreasonable.

That's not what voting in governmental elections is capable of doing, for exactly the reasons anarchists lay out. But if we see voting as minimizing the damage inflicted by the state, it becomes more like hiring a lawyer to defend oneself in court, or marrying to acquire a passport.

Anarchists have regularly accepted (not without objection) both of these strategies: Goldman married British coal miner James Colton to get a British passport, and she regularly secured the services of her friend and lawyer Harry Weinberger in numerous court battles. Voters often moan that they are tired of selecting from the lesser of evils, but I am suggesting that, in light of anarchists' trenchant critique of suffrage, choosing the lesser of evils is exactly what we should do.

Reflecting on the lessons she learned in her life, Goldman stated in her autobiography that one cannot "remain on earth without making compromises." Taking the anarchist view of suffrage seriously, I suggest, means accepting that we will never achieve a just society through the ballot box. It also means accepting that engaging electoral politics has risks: we risk legitimating the system, jeopardizing our own political identity, and neglecting more radical agendas. Goldman and most of her comrades found these limitations unacceptable. But 100 years later, I take more guidance from Goldman's conclusion that compromise is unavoidable.

In grave times, we need to work against the worst threats however we can. Even through voting.

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