

Why I'm Not Voting Green in New Jersey

October 29, 2018

The case for voting for Green candidate Howie Hawkins for governor of New York is a strong one and were I a New Yorker (I live in New Jersey), I would do so. True, he made a serious error in sharing a platform with Assadist, Islamophobic, and conspiracist Jimmy Dore,¹ but there's no doubt that on a whole host of issues Hawkins' position is an admirable left position, far closer to my views than are those of the awful Democrat, Governor Andrew Cuomo.



My friend Dan La Botz has offered an argument in favor of DSA endorsing Hawkins. But the problem with his argument is what he doesn't say, and which, if one applies his same argument to New Jersey, leads to a conclusion I very much reject, namely, that one should vote Green in the upcoming contest for U.S. Senate.²

What Dan's analysis totally omits is any consideration of the crucial spoiler problem. In New York, a vote for Hawkins is a safe choice; there's no spoiler danger. But by not discussing this issue, Dan implies that we don't need to examine the potential spoiler effect in other races. Some suggest we should vote for every Democrat, Dan says, but these people forget that the Democrats have been awful, pursuing neoliberal policies and in many ways facilitating the rise of Trump. Of course they have. But their awfulness is not the only question. We need to consider the question of relative awfulness, and whether our actions, our votes, might contribute to our being saddled with a significantly more awful outcome.

Any decision on how to vote needs to be informed by an analysis of how people's well-being and left prospects will be furthered by one's vote and how they will be harmed. If someone refuses to participate in this analysis, if one is unconcerned with actual consequences, then it's hard to see that they are engaging with politics. Obviously, people performing this analysis may come to different conclusions, but all too often no analysis is performed at all.

Instead we hear things like "Vote your hopes, not your fears." But this is hardly sound advice in other areas of life. I hope that if I sell off my life savings in order to buy lottery tickets, I'll become rich. But my fear of the odds of losing leads me to reject that idea. "Vote for the candidate you really prefer." But if I were really voting for the candidate whose views most closely coincided with my own, I'd write-in myself, and other leftists would write-in themselves. But no one does that because we care about consequences; it's not just a matter of feeling good.

In the November 2016 election, Jill Stein's Green party presidential campaign in swing states had disastrous consequences. (I voted for her, not without second thoughts, in safe New Jersey.) If Green voters in three states - Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan - had instead voted for Clinton, the election outcome would have been different. Green voters, as inconsequential as they seem, had it within their power to block the two Republican presidents of the 21st century, both of whom failed to secure a majority of the popular vote. Greens, of course, reject this analysis, but their arguments are unsatisfactory.

Greens tell us all the things that Clinton (and Gore) did wrong. Their list of Democratic party perfidy and plunders is accurate enough - and Democratic party responsibility is immense. But why tell us about what Democrats did when obviously they were not as blameworthy as Republicans? Because

when an establishment Democrat complains about the outcome it makes sense to challenge them in terms of what *they* could have done differently. People are responsible – politically and morally — for their actions, not for the actions of others. But the same applies to the left. The left couldn't control what Clinton (or Trump) would do. But they could control what they would do. And what the Green party and some other components of the left did was fail to provide votes that could have made an immense difference to the world.

Some argue that if Green voters hadn't voted Green, they wouldn't have voted at all, or maybe would have voted for some other party – Bush or Trump — so their votes didn't matter. (It's a sad commentary on the educational efficacy of the Green campaign or its potential to become a significant left vehicle for social change that it attracts people to its ranks whose second choice might have been Bush or Trump.) It is true that if all Green voters would otherwise have been non-voters, then their Green votes had no effect on the outcome. But that doesn't lessen the moral responsibility of these voters. They still had it within their power to change the outcome of the election from the greater evil to the lesser evil and they chose not to do so. They didn't create the horrible choices they faced, and they aren't responsible for what they can't control. But they could control whether they voted.

What did we lose by voting for Greens in swing states in 2016? For starters, had those voters voted otherwise the United States would still be in the Paris Climate Agreement, the U.S. would still be in the Iran nuclear deal, the U.S. embassy would not be in Jerusalem, the KKK would not be empowered, and the huge tax giveaway to the rich would not have been enacted.

Moreover, Gorsuch and Kavanaugh would not be sitting on the Supreme Court. Trump's Supreme Court is going to entrench partisan gerrymandering, voter suppression, big money in politics, the crushing of unions. All of these things will set back tremendously the long-term struggle for socialism.

Some like to point to Howard Zinn's famous comments about how we shouldn't despair over the loss of the Supreme Court; what ultimately matters is the power of popular movements. But those who quote these remarks conveniently ignore his clear statement favoring strategic voting:

"Yes, there are candidates who are somewhat better than others, and at certain times of national crisis (the Thirties, for instance, or right now) where even a slight difference between the two parties may be a matter of life and death.... Would I support one candidate against another? Yes, for two minutes—the amount of time it takes to pull the lever down in the voting booth."

This is very different from saying that election outcomes don't matter or that there's never a difference between the Democrats and the Republicans.

The Green vote in swing states hurt the left in another way as well. To all the victims of policies on which Trump has been worse than Clinton would have been, it looks like the left was saying the differences didn't matter. Yes, deportations were bad under Obama, but one looks obtuse to ignore how much worse they are under Trump. And the same goes for the environment, for LGBTQ rights, for affirmative action, for reproductive rights, and on and on. Having these life-and-death matters for so many treated by leftists as not worth voting to prevent can't help but discredit the left.

Against all these costs, what was the benefit of voting Green? The party got 1 percent nationally. It's hard to see the major difference this made compared to garnering 0.5 percent. And, in fact, they might have gotten more votes nationally if they had put their resources into safe blue states rather than spending in the swing states.

To be sure, while voting for awful Democrats may offer us some protection from reaction, it won't promote progressive change. For that we need to build the social movements — rank and file labor organizations, community organizations — that in the short run can force the politicians to come to them and in the longer run can serve as the basis for an effective left ballot line. But we're nowhere near that yet and the Greens getting 1 percent instead of 0.5 percent doesn't make a dramatic contribution to that goal.

So what is the current situation in New Jersey? In the Senate contest the incumbent Democrat is Robert Menendez, an opponent of the Iran nuclear deal³ and an advocate for strangling Cuba, who just narrowly avoided conviction for corruption charges brought by the Obama justice department. He is running against Republican Bob Hugin, a self-financing multi-millionaire drug company executive who made his fortune overcharging cancer patients. He claims to be a moderate Republican, but he seems a sure vote for Trump: he gave two hundred thousand dollars to Trump in 2016, was chair of Trump's NJ finance committee, and a Trump delegate at the Republican convention. He says he would have voted for Kavanaugh. And in the long-shot possibility that the Democrats win some of the lean-Republican Senate races, this seat could be the difference between Democratic control of the Senate or not and thus the difference between being able to block Trump appointments or not.

Right now, the polls show the race to be very close. Menendez seems to be ahead, but in several polls his lead is within the margin of error. The Cook Political Report rates the race a toss-up, while FiveThirtyEight thinks Menendez has a seven out of eight chance of winning (it had given Clinton a 71% chance of winning in 2016). So we are in a situation where the Green party vote could potentially decide whether a Trump supporter wins the Senate in New Jersey, and even who controls the Senate.

The Green party candidate is Madelyn Hoffman. As with Hawkins, her views on most of the political issues of the day are close to mine (though not on Syria, where I find her position awful). We have been at demonstrations together and we have been arrested outside the offices of Senators Booker and Menendez together. The NJ Green party has been a vital part of progressive activism in the state. But Hoffman's Green party Senate campaign in my view is extremely ill-advised. More precisely, while her campaign may have made sense back in the summer, before the polls showed a very tight race, today the campaign poses a real danger.⁴

Like Jill Stein, Hoffman supports what is variously called instant run-off voting or ranked-choice voting, a voting system that would negate the spoiler effect. This is commendable, but it is not enough to favor alternative voting systems; it is necessary to offer ways for us to address the spoiler problem in the meantime, *until* we get a new voting system. Sadly, neither Stein nor Hoffman have done this. Stein went out of her way to refuse to acknowledge that there was a meaningful difference between Clinton and Trump (obviously, there's no spoiler problem, no danger of getting the worse evil, if the two major candidates are equally evil).

In September 2016, an interviewer asked Jill Stein whether a voter in a swing state should vote for Clinton to stop Trump? She replied “absolutely not.” Even if this allows Trump to take the White House? Stein continued with her stock response: “I will feel terrible if Trump gets elected and I will feel terrible if Clinton gets elected.” Trump and Clinton, she said, are just “two ways to commit suicide.” “I would rather go down fighting than to allow myself to commit suicide by voting for” either Trump or Clinton.

In return for short runs losses and long run losses, third party advocates point to the long-term

educational benefits of their campaigns. But if we think education is key, surely we need to be conveying the truth. The problem is that if the Greens in 2016 had told the truth, there was the danger that people would draw the reasonable conclusion that they ought to vote for the lesser evil. So they obscured the actual differences between the parties.

In New Jersey, too, the Greens never seriously confront the spoiler problem. If climate change is really the tremendous threat to humankind that the Greens claim – and I believe it is – then allowing the victory of a Trump supporter over a supporter of the Paris Climate Agreement is extremely problematic. And the same is true across a host of issues. There are serious differences that the Green party elides. And rather than pointing out which is the greater evil, the NJ Greens' recent mailing of their accomplishments highlights a single demonstration focused on one of the major party candidates: they protested at a Hillary Clinton fundraiser for Menendez.

Notice, that in some cases it is possible to argue that a left third party campaign pushes the Democrat to take a better position. So Howie Hawkins, for example, claims his presence in the 2014 gubernatorial race pushed Cuomo to the left on fracking. The causation here is not easy to prove – it's certainly not as clear as the evidence that Bernie Sanders' primary challenge in 2016 pushed Clinton to adopt a host of more left positions in her platform. But in any event, it's hard to see how this argument is relevant to this year's New Jersey Senate race. If the Greens succeed in taking enough votes from Menendez that he loses, then obviously this will not move Hugin left. But even if Menendez wins, there is no evidence that he has taken or modified positions in response to the Green campaign.

How can we ever get radical change, some ask, if we never want to risk harming Democrats? Yes, when the Greens actually have a chance of winning, when they are polling 30 or 40 percent, they will need to take that risk. But here we're talking about a party polling 1 percent and hoping against hope to increase that a bit.

In other areas of life, we understand that in an imperfect world one has to make compromises. I wish I never had to buy products from companies that operate on the profit motive, let alone that pay their employees horrible wages, or whose workers are not unionized. A tiny fraction of folks opt out of the cash economy – but most do not. Likewise, if you ask a non-pacifist leftist whether violence can ever be justified, they reply that we wish social change could all come from nonviolent actions, but that's not always possible. Most leftists don't condemn people who make those compromises. So why condemn the compromise that says that while we are working, organizing, and fighting for social change, we sometimes have to reluctantly cast our ballots for awful candidates?

Does Menendez "deserve" our vote? Of course not. He is totally unworthy. But I'm not voting for him as a favor to him, I'm voting for him as a favor to me and to all the people in New Jersey and beyond who will be better off having him in office than his Republican opponent. In the same way, when I participate in the capitalist economy, it's not because I feel that Exxon and Google "deserve" my support, but because my doing so is currently necessary to survive.

I am not "endorsing" Menendez, I am not "supporting" Menendez. I will be voting for him, while working as hard as possible to oppose his rotten policies. I like the formulation of Adolph Reed in 2016 in urging leftists to cast their ballots for Clinton: "Vote for the Lying Neoliberal Warmonger." My slogan is "Vote for Mendacious Menendez. Then Work Like Hell to Fight His Awful Positions."

Notes

1. The NYC chapter of the International Socialist Organization rescinded its endorsement of the Hawkins-Lee ticket over this issue; while others urged "critical support." One can of course vote for someone – as I urge below – without endorsing them.

2. As an aside, let me note that I don't agree with Dan's claim about the impossibility of the Democratic Party being captured by the left. All the arguments he adduces could have been made just as well about the Republican Party, and yet that Party – once firmly in the control of the Republican establishment — was taken over by Donald Trump. Sure, the centrist Democratic party establishment has lots of power and rigs the system against leftist challengers. But no one believed that Sanders could do as well as he did. He was able to raise money on a scale that refuted simplistic views of "what capital wants." And, if, for example, he had been able to win over more African Americans, all the super-delegates and all the Debbie Wasserman Schultzian manipulations in the world wouldn't have been able to keep him from winning the nomination – or at least would have been no more successful in keeping him from winning the nomination than the Jeb Bush establishment was able to block Trump from securing the Republican nomination. It's not that I'm saying the Democratic Party is subject to capture; it's just that I'm no longer willing to accept a priori arguments about its impossibility. Given all of our erroneous political predictions of the past, I feel we all could use a little humility in trying to predict the future.

3. Though even here, Menendez is better than Trump; he opposed the deal but also opposed the U.S. withdrawal from it.

4. The same applies to the one New Jersey Green party contest for the U.S. House of Representatives. The challenge is not being made in a safe Democratic district, but in the 7th district, where Democrat Tom Malinowski has a slight edge against Republican Leonard Lance. (FiveThirtyEight rates it a "lean Democrat" [10/28/18]; Cook Political Report says it's a "Republican toss-up" [10/23/18]). This is one of the districts important for the Democrats to flip if they are to gain control of the House.

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