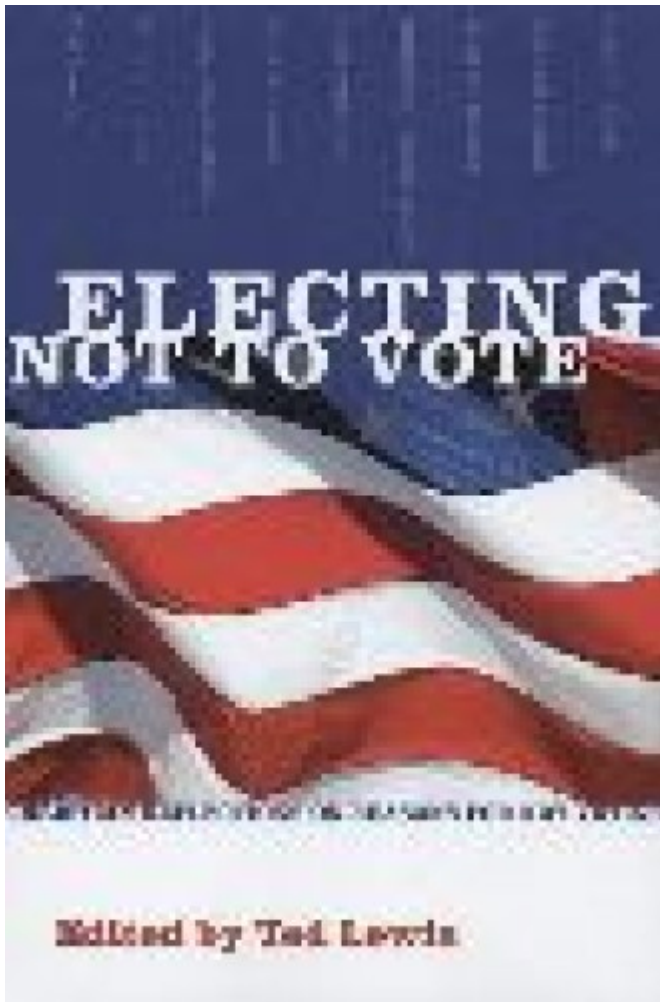


Electing Not to Vote: Christian Reflections on Reasons for Not Voting

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Electing Not to Vote: Christian Reflections on Reasons for Not Voting

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If there is one idea that unites Jim Wallis and Pat Robertson, it is the idea that voting is a good idea. American Christians of both the right and the left have been so thoroughly indoctrinated into thinking that democracy is an unarguable good and that voting is the price we pay for the privilege of life in a constitutional democracy that there's nobody left among us to question the practice. Voting has been inflated from a democratic right to a Christian responsibility, and we have been so accustomed to thinking positively about voting that it's difficult for us to think like Christians.

Here is a wonderful little book that answers a big question that most of us American Christians have lost the theological resources even to ask: Why vote?

Each of these nine essays defends Christian refusal to vote—"conscientious abstention"—with a variety of reasons, all of which (with the possible exception of those offered by a Catholic author) seem indebted to the ecclesiology of John Howard Yoder. American Christians have succumbed to a state-as-savior mentality in which voting has assumed religious-like trappings. Registering, showing up on the appointed day, entering the curtained booth and secretly voting has become an unquestioned, sacred "confession of faith," says Andy Alexis-Baker; it's the little pinch of incense we offer to Caesar. All of the essays argue that though voting doesn't make much difference one way or the other, Christians ought to take care in their worship because the pinch of incense may not be inconsequential.

Today many in the African-American church believe that the democratic gains of the civil rights movement were solely about obtaining for everyone the right to vote. Nekeisha Alexis-Baker reminds us that the movement also involved a variety of alternate, creative forms of social engagement, many of which are much more effective and certainly more theologically defensible than the practice of secret, individual voting. If in securing the right to vote, African Americans thought they were obtaining their key to equal participation in government, they were wrong, she argues, as she exposes the myth of "vote as voice" and the subtle but powerful and insidious ways in which minorities are kept quiet and disempowered through the majority's vote: stop complaining about the government, minorities are told, because the government you have is the government you chose. Claims for the power of the ballot box may sometimes be valid in regard to local elections, she says, but they never are for national elections. Until we do something about the

electoral college and admit to the oddness that half of our citizenry already elects not to vote, voting as practiced in this democracy is a sham.

Even more troubling for Christians, voting attenuates the church's political imagination and deludes us into thinking that we have actually performed some worthy social action when we have pestered church members to get out and vote. If voting is not a definite evil, argue a number of these authors, it is at best the weakest and most ineffective form of Christian political action.

Karl Barth's vehement opposition to the Nazis and his comparative nonchalance toward the communists is used as an illustration of why Christlike humility is a badly needed corrective to the self-deification of the modern democratic state, writes G. Scott Becker. The most remarkable achievement of the modern democratic state is its ability to convince us that it is a creation of the people. We ought to take another look at voting, now that it has become the state's main rationale for violence against other states. Why are we fighting in Iraq? To give the Iraqis the same glorious freedom to make their voices heard that Floridians enjoyed in the 2000 presidential election.

Most of these essays demonstrate the fruitfulness of the Anabaptist view of the church and the inadequacy of most mainline theology and Christology. Michael Degan rigorously exposes the political captivity of both conservative and liberal Christians who lack a theology for thinking about the state or the church in categories other than those that are imposed on them by secular political thought. A couple of the Mennonites ask: If you don't believe in capital punishment or war, why vote to put people in positions where they will be forced, by their oath of office, to engage in them?

Todd David Whitmore's essay offers a Catholic perspective that would make Richard John Neuhaus wince. Whitmore shows how the idea of voting for a "lesser evil" candidate is a thin defense of voting and a way of stifling Catholic Christian witness. The difference between McCain and Obama is not as great as the distance of both of them from Catholic social teaching. So if you are a faithful Catholic, why bother casting a vote?

There is even an essay from the "prophetic, patriotic, Pentecostal, pacifist" point of view, presented by Paul Alexander, who argues that Christian citizenship in the kingdom of God does not indebt us at all to the kingdoms of this world—except that

we should make a courageous, countercultural, collective witness that none of these absurd little state displays are the kingdom of God. When the church allowed the state to define politics as voting, we confused presidentialism with God's kingdom, and the result is the modern, sometimes benevolent but often murderous democratic state that lacks any intellectual or moral check from the church on its hypocritical pretensions.

Though Pentecostals, Anabaptists and Catholics appear in the list of contributors to this volume, there are no mainline Protestants. I fear that this absence is testimony to the paucity and indeed the boredom of the mainline Protestant theology of politics. Most of what passes for Christian political engagement is tame stuff compared with the dynamite in this book.

I was intrigued by the idea, expressed by a couple of the authors, that voting is suspect because it's private, secret and individual, whereas Christian ethics are inherently public and communal. The Mennonites warn that the decision not to vote, as a Christian witness, must never be undertaken in private or as a heroic individual act. That's not the way Christians do ethics. The social pressures that undergird voting are so strong that there is no way to sustain this sort of radical Christian witness without a church backing you up.

I agree with most of the authors who warn that voting only encourages the functionaries of the modern state to think that the people (who are now the functional equivalent of God) have given them some sort of popular mandate to do as they please to defend the state and its power. For the most part, I found their arguments to be biblically radical and curiously compelling.

Still, despite the wonderfully biblical and theological arguments of the essays in this little book, I confess that I expect to slither secretly into a voting booth in November and cast my ballot.

Sadly, this book has robbed me of any theological rationale for my furtive actions in November; I just vote out of habit. It's what people in my economic bracket do. My church even encourages me in it.