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The Ethicist

Is It OK to Vote for My Third-Party Fave This Presidential Election?

The magazine's Ethicist columnist on the efficacy of voting your conscience.



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I'm caught in a bind between two parties, the Democratic Party and the Green Party. I believe in the message and values of the Green Party candidate; however, they never seem to get elected, so many suggest voting for them is moot. This feels like a catch-22. But with the upcoming presidential election, my peers suggest that voting for a third party ensures a Republican victory, akin to supporting the opposition.

Increasingly, my beliefs and values are not reflected on either side of the two-party, one-coin system we have in our country. Is voting for a party that I know will lose more or less unconscionable than voting for a party I don't fully believe in? — Name Withheld, Philadelphia

From the Ethicist:

The 2020 census counted over a quarter of a billion voting-age Americans — enormously diverse in national origin, religion, ethnicity and all sorts of other dimensions. It would be absolutely astonishing if two parties could reflect the precise political values of most of them. The parties themselves are internally divided on many matters of fact and values. Even if you found candidates who matched your preferences, priorities and beliefs, voting for them wouldn't guarantee that their views would be turned into policy, and one reason is that, given the legislative realities, they themselves might end up backing policies far from their ideal ones. People who vote for candidates they know will lose — as with Democratic voters in heavily Republican districts, and vice versa — aren't expecting their views to be represented by their elected officials anyway. They're just expressing an opinion as to which is the best party.

If you truly have no preference between the candidates you think might win, then casting a purely expressive vote is the obvious thing to do. In countries with parliamentary systems and coalition politics, supporting a small, emerging party can build toward a future in which that party governs — that's the story of the Labour Party in Britain in the first three decades of the 20th century. For that matter, if the United States had a ranked-choice voting system for presidential elections, you could vote for the Green candidate first and put a mainstream party candidate second, knowing that your second-choice candidate would get your vote if the Green one came in third and neither front-runner had an outright majority of first-place votes.

There are many possible systems for democratic voting, and though some are better than others, all have shortcomings. Yet one choice you won't be able to make this November is what kind of electoral system you're voting under. And our current electoral system regularly forces people to choose between expressing their values and contributing to what they consider the lesser of two evils. If you believe that, of the two major-party candidates, one would be decidedly worse for the country than the other, expressing your party preference could contribute to an outcome you'd least want on your conscience.