

# Commentary: Why I'm voting third party

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(RNS)—For different reasons in the case of each, my conscience does not permit me to vote for either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris for president.

That doesn't mean I will stay home this November, however. My vote still matters. I will have my say at the ballot box. I will be writing in the name of a third-party candidate.

Every time I state my intention to vote for a third party, my Democratic-voting friends declare a third-party vote is essentially a vote for the GOP candidate. Likewise, my GOP-voting friends say it's a vote for the Democrat. I guess that means I get three votes.

But my one vote for the third-party candidate is the one that really counts.

To be sure, third-party candidates rarely, if ever, win in any election. Here and there, Independents do. Indeed, the votes garnered by third-party candidates rarely make even a dent in national elections.

Wikipedia tells me only in three presidential elections has third-party [vote splitting](#) exceeded the winner's margin of victory—in 1844, 2000 and, interestingly enough, 2016.

## Why bother with third-party

So why bother to vote for a minor-party candidate?

For one thing, in most states such votes are recorded—even the truly throwaway votes like write-ins for "[Mickey Mouse](#)" or "[Willie Nelson](#)"—that

don't get counted in the results.

While every state [varies](#) in terms of which parties are permitted on the ballots and which allow write-in votes, most states have some option that allows voters who dissent from the two major voices to vote their conscience in one form or another.

Having a vote on the record matters, even if in small ways.

If a person simply doesn't vote, there is no record of whether or not that missing vote is owed to illness, obstacle or apathy.

More importantly, if a voter "holds her nose" and votes for an unacceptable candidate or writes in a celebrity or fictional character as a joke, there is no record of what values that voter would vote for were there a candidate who better reflected those values.

If there's anything viable candidates should know, it's what the people really want. Holding your nose isn't recorded. Only a vote is.

## **Long-term strategy**

Although voting for a third-party candidate might seem like voting for failure, at least in the short term, it can be part of a long-term strategy for change.

Let's face it: The biggest beneficiaries of the two-party system are the two major parties.

As [The Washington Post](#) explains, "the zero-sum, winner-take-all dynamics of U.S. elections make it nearly impossible for third parties to gain electoral traction, despite [survey data](#) that shows fully half of Americans do not identify with any party and label themselves independents."

Each party gains votes—and power—by positioning itself against the other, not in any permanent or principled fashion, but for the time in which it takes to advance in the polls, tick the box and gain the office.

The last thing the two major parties want is ballot access by third parties or [ranked-choice voting](#). Alternatives like these mean the major-party candidates would need to appeal to more voters, not only the fringes on the extremes who are the most certain to show up on Election Day.

The two major parties need each other in the same way all dysfunctional co-dependents need each other.

This is why I have voted for third-party candidates in more elections than I can remember. In fact, I once was a third-party candidate myself. In 1998, I ran for lieutenant governor of New York as a third-party candidate on the Right-to-Life Party ticket.

## Growing third parties

Minor parties have a long history in American politics, and they play an essential role in democracy, even if we who support those parties wish that imprint were larger.

The [list of these parties](#) is rather long, in fact. Some of the bigger minor parties include the Libertarian Party, the Green Party and the American Solidarity Party.

This year, as in 2016 and 2020, I will be voting for the [American Solidarity Party](#) in the presidential election because, while no party or candidate is perfect, this party more closely reflects my political and personal values than any other, by far. I also serve on the party's advisory board.

But there are shorter-term gains that come with voting for a candidate sure to lose. As one writer [explains](#), a third-party vote “is about much more than

winning or losing; it is about expanding the platform of minority parties and independent candidates.”

Even more practically, third-party candidates can get public funding for future campaigns if they receive the required minimum of votes.

[Federal Election Commission rules](#) state: “Minor party candidates and new party candidates may become eligible for partial public funding of their general election campaigns. A minor party candidate is the nominee of a party whose candidate received between five and 25 percent of the total popular vote in the preceding presidential election.”

## **Responsible to vote**

I understand all votes require a moral as well as a political calculus. Yet, ultimately, in a democracy, why one casts a particular vote is, in many ways, more important than the vote itself.

I treat voting as an investment in the long-term future of the nation and society, not only as something that will benefit me in the near future or even in my lifetime.

Voting is as much about advancing the beliefs, values and ideas that undergird policies as it is about voting for the policies. Thus, voting for candidates who most closely align with my most important beliefs, values and ideas is a way of advancing the same into the future and for the future.

Not everyone will agree with this strategy, to be sure. But we all get a vote. And the only one each of us is responsible for is the one we cast.

We have been trained as American citizens into thinking we must choose one of two options. But as citizens of the kingdom of God, we can choose to aim higher.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: J.B. Cranfill, [owner and editor of the Baptist Standard](#) from 1892 to 1904 was a third-party candidate who [ran for vice president](#) of the United States on the Prohibition Party ticket in 1892.*

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