

No, voting isn't like being part of a firing squad

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Another election year, another crop of posts about why people shouldn't vote. Among churchy bloggers, these often take the form of arguments about suspicion toward state power, questions about where our real citizenship lies, etc. [Here's something different](#) from libertarian philosopher Jason Brennan, who put out a book on the subject last year. At the Princeton UP blog, Brennan argues that people should only vote if they're well enough informed to "vote well":

The best available evidence indicates that most voters mean well, but are politically incompetent. . . . They owe it to the rest of us to abstain. Citizens have no duty to vote, but if they do vote, they must vote well, for what they justifiably believe will promote good government.

There's nothing morally wrong with being ignorant about politics, or with forming your political beliefs through an irrational thought processes—so long as you don't vote.

I'm gonna stick with one person, one vote—the dangers of majority rule seem less chilling to me than those of a system by which only the smart (how smart?), informed (by whom?) people decide. But that's well-worn territory. Moving on:

Individual voters have almost no power. You are more likely to win Powerball than to decide an election. If so, does that excuse individual voters? My individual vote will not hurt anybody, so doesn't that mean I can just vote however I'd like?

No, in a single-winner lottery one person wins and everyone else's entries mean nothing (except perhaps driving the winnings up). In a popular election, every vote counts; what's vanishingly unlikely is a candidate winning by a one-vote margin. But everyone decided the election; it's just that no one decided it *alone*. Brennan goes on:

Suppose a 100-member firing squad is about to shoot an innocent child. Suppose they are trained to shoot so that each bullet will hit the child at the same time. Suppose each bullet, on its own, would suffice to kill her. Suppose also that you can't stop the shooters. The child will die regardless of what you do. Now, suppose the shooters offer to let you join in and fire with them. Is it okay for you to take the 101st shot?

Suppose that's a ridiculous analogy. As soon as the U.S. starts holding sham elections with only one candidate on the ballot, and that candidate stands only for unambiguously immoral things, I will readily take this lesson to heart. In actual America, however imperfect our democracy is, we tend to have multiple candidates standing for somewhat different things, with legitimate arguments to be made for each of them. People vote without being informed, but that's their right. And if the goal is for more people to be engaged, responsible citizens, then work for that directly—discouraging people from voting only makes this harder.

It takes a certain kind of dedicated libertarian to suggest—apparently straightfacedly—that participating in the (oppressive, tyrannical!) practice of voting for the candidate of your choice is somehow analogous to shooting a kid. Sheesh.