

# The Lesser of Two Evils

by Leonard E. Read

According to *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, “the existence of only two major parties, as in most English-speaking countries, presupposes general public agreement on constitutional questions and on the aims of government.” The reason for two parties is that each might keep a check on the other in order that neither party exceeds its constitutional bounds. The competitive two-party system, so it was thought, would assure a continuum of moral as well as political rectitude. The competition would expose and thus rid the public offices of charlatans; only statesmen would hold down the jobs.

Certainly the two-party system aimed at, if it did not presuppose, honest candidates contending for office; that is, each office seeker fairly presenting his own beliefs, leaving to the voters the matter of choosing. In respectable two-party theory the candidate tries to persuade the voters that his views are the ones they should support. Clearly, the theory did not include the idea that vying candidates should be nothing but mere responses to voter opinion polls. That would be senseless. Were this the case, we could now feed all voter opinions into an electronic computer and, within a few seconds, have all legislation written for us!

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Regardless of how respectable the theory, its practice has come a cropper. Today, trimming is so much in vogue that often a voter cannot cast a ballot except for one of two trimmers. Heard over and over again is the apology, “Well, the only choice I had was to vote for the lesser of two evils.” Implicit in this confession are a moral tragedy and a political fallacy which, in combination, must eventually lead to economic disaster.

## I. The Moral Tragedy

It is morally tragic whenever a citizen’s only choice is between two wrongdoers—that is, between two trimmers.

A trimmer, according to the dictionary, is one who changes his opinions and policies to suit the occasion. In contemporary political life, he is any candidate whose position on issues depends solely on what he thinks will have most voter appeal. He ignores the dictates of his higher conscience, trims his personal idea of what is morally right, tailors his stand to the popular fancy. Integrity, the accurate reflection in word and deed of that which is thought to be morally right, is sacrificed to expediency.

The above are severe charges, and I do not wish to be misunderstood. One of countless personal experiences will help clarify what is meant: A candidate for Congress sat across the desk listening to my views about limited government. At the conclusion of an hour’s discussion he remarked, “I am in thorough

accord with your views; you are absolutely right. But I couldn't get elected on any such platform, so I shall represent myself as holding views other than these." He might as well have added, "I propose, in my campaign, to bear false witness."

No doubt the candidate thought, on balance, that he was justified, that righteousness would be better served were he elected regardless of how untruthfully he represented his position—than were he to stand for his version of the truth and go down to defeat.

This candidate is "a mixed-up kid." His values are topsy-turvy, as the saying goes. In an egotism that has no parallel, he puts his election to office above honesty. Why, asks the responsible voter, should I endorse dishonesty by voting for such a candidate? He has, on his own say-so, forsworn virtue by insisting on bearing false witness. Does he think his ambition for office is right because he needs a job? Then let him seek employment where want of principle is less harmful to others. Or, is his notion of rightness based on how much the rest of us would benefit by having him as our representative? What? A person without moral scruple representing us in Congress! The role of the legislator is to secure our rights to life, liberty, and property—that is, to protect us against fraud, violence, predation, and misrepresentation (false witness). Would our candidate have us believe that "it takes a crook to catch a crook"?

Such righteousness or virtue as exists in the mind of a man does not and cannot manifest itself in the absence of integrity—the honest, accurate reflection in deeds of one's real beliefs. Without this virtue the other virtues must lie dormant and unused. What else remains? It is doubtful if anything contributes more to the diseased condition of society than the diminishing practice of integrity.

Those who attach this much importance to integrity must perforce construe trimming as evil. Therefore, when both candidates for public office are judged to be trimmers, the one who trims less than the other is often regarded as "the lesser of two evils." But, is he really? It must be conceded that there are gradations of wrongdoing: killing is worse

than stealing, and perhaps stealing is worse than covetousness. At least, if wrongdoing is not comparative, then it is self-evident that the best of us are just as evil as the worst of us; for man is fallible, all men!

## Principles Will Not Bend

While categories of wrongdoing are comparative, it does not follow that wrong deeds within any given category of evil are comparative. For instance, it is murder whether one man is slain, or two. It is stealing whether the amount is ten cents or a thousand dollars. And, a lie is a lie whether told to one person or to a million. "Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not steal"; "Thou shalt not bear false witness" are derived from principles. Principles do not permit of compromise; they are either adhered to or surrendered.

Is trimming comparative? Can one trimmer be less at fault than another trimmer? Does the *quantity* of trimming have anything whatsoever to do with the matter? Or, rather, is this not a question of *quality* or character? To trim is to ignore the dictates of higher conscience; it is to take flight from integrity. Is not the candidate who will trim once for one vote likely to trim twice for more votes? Does he not demonstrate by any single act of trimming, regardless of how minor, that he stands ready to abandon the dictates of conscience for the place he seeks in the political sun? Does not the extent or quantity of trimming merely reflect a judgment as to how much trimming is expedient?

If the only relevant question at issue is whether or not a candidate will trim at all, then trimming is not comparative and, thus, it would be incorrect to report, "I cast my ballot for the lesser of two evils." Accuracy would require, "I felt there was no choice except to cast a ballot for one of two men, both of whom have sacrificed integrity for the hope of votes."

## Irresponsible Citizenship

We must not, however, heap all our condemnation on candidates who trim. There

would be no such candidates were it not for voters who trim. Actually, when we find only trimmers to vote for, most of us are getting what we deserve. The trimmers who succeed in offering themselves as candidates are, by and large, mere reflections of irresponsible citizenship—that is, of neglected thinking, study, education, vigilance. Candidates who trim and voters who trim are each cause and each effect; they feed on each other.

To repeat, when one must choose between men who forsake integrity, the situation is tragic, and there is little relief at the polling level except as candidates of integrity may be encouraged by voters of integrity. Impractical idealism? Of course not! Read Edmund Burke, one of the great statesmen of all time, addressing his constituency:

But his [the candidate's] unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

## II. The Political Fallacy

Is it fallacious to believe that responsible citizenship requires casting a ballot for one or the other of two candidates, *regardless of how far the candidates have departed from moral rectitude?*

Before trying to arrive at an answer, let us reflect on the reason why the so-called duty of casting a ballot, regardless of circumstance, is so rarely questioned. Quite obviously, the duty to vote is one of those sanctified institutions, such as motherhood, which is beyond criticism. The obligation to vote at any and all elections, whatever the issues or personalities, is equated with responsible citizenship. Voting is deeply embedded in the democratic mores as a duty, and one does not affront the mores

without the risk of scorn. To do so is to “raise the dead”; it is to resurrect questions that have been settled once and for all; it is to throw doubt on custom, tradition, orthodoxy, the folkways!

Yet any person who is conscious of our rapid drift toward the omnipotent state can hardly escape the suspicion that there may be a fault in our habitual way of looking at things. If the suspicion be correct, then it would be fatal never to examine custom. So, let us bring the sanctity of voting in to the open and take a hard look at it, not in the spirit of advocating something but of exploring it.

## Hitler vs. Stalin

Now for the hard look: Where is the American who will argue that responsible citizenship requires casting a ballot if a Hitler and a Stalin were the opposing candidates? “Ah,” some will complain, “you carry the example to an absurdity.” Very well, let us move closer to home and our own experience.

Government in the U.S.A. has been pushed far beyond its proper sphere. The Marxian tenet, “from each according to ability, to each according to need,” backed by the armed force of the state, has become established polity. This is partly rationalized by something called “the new economics.” Within this kind of political framework, it is to be expected that one candidate will stand for the coercive expropriation of the earned income of all citizens, giving the funds thus gathered to those in groups A, B, and C. Nor need we be surprised that his opponent differs from him only in advocating that the loot be given to those in groups X, Y, and Z. Does responsible citizenship require casting a ballot for either of these political plunderers? The citizen has no significant moral choice but only an immoral choice in the event he has joined the unholy alliance himself and thinks that one of the candidates will deliver some of the largess to him or to a group he favors. In the latter case, the problem is not one of responsible citizenship but of irresponsible looting.

## Registering a Protest

Does responsible citizenship require voting for irresponsible candidates? To ballot in favor of irresponsible candidates as though it were one's duty is to misconstrue the meaning of duty. To cast a ballot for a trimmer, because no man of integrity is offering himself, does as much as one can with a ballot to encourage other trimmers to run for office. Can anyone conceive of any element of protest in such balloting? To vote for a trimmer goes further: it would seem to urge, as strongly as one can at the polls, that men of integrity not offer themselves as candidates.

What would happen if we adopted as a criterion: *Never vote for a trimmer!* Conceding a generous liberality on the part of the electorate, millions of us would not cast ballots. Would the end result of this substantial, nonviolent protest, this large-scale demonstration of "voting by turning our backs," worsen our situation? It is difficult to imagine how it could. For a while we would continue to get what we now have: a high percentage of trimmers and plunderers in public office, men who promise privileges in exchange for ballots—and freedom. In time, however, with this silent but eloquent refusal to participate, the situation might, conceivably, improve. Men of integrity and high moral quality—statesmen—might show forth and, if so, we could add their numbers to the few now in office.

Would a return to integrity by itself solve our problem? No, for many men of integrity do not understand freedom; or, if they do, are not devoted to it. But it is only among men of integrity that any solution can *begin* to take shape. Such men, at least, will do the right as they see the right; they tend to be teachable. Trimmers and plunderers, on the other hand, are the enemies of morality and freedom by definition; their motivations are below the level of principles; they cannot see beyond the emoluments of office.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a thought to weigh: If respect for a candidate's integrity were widely adopted as a criterion for casting a ballot, millions of us, as matters now stand, would not cast ballots. Yet, in a very practical sense, would not

those of us who protest in this manner be voting? Certainly, we would be *counted* among that growing number who, by our conscious and deliberate inaction, proclaim that we have no party. What other choice have we at the polling level? Would not this encourage men of statesmanlike qualities to offer themselves in candidacy?

## A Sacred Institution

Why is so much emphasis placed upon voting as a responsibility of citizenship?<sup>2</sup> Why the sanctity attached to voting? Foremost, no doubt, is a carry-over from an all-but-lost ideal in which voting is associated with making choices between honest beliefs, between candidates of integrity. We tend to stick with the form without regard to what has happened to the substance. Further, it may derive in part from the general tendency to play the role of Robin Hood, coupled with a reluctance to acknowledge this practice for what it is. Americans, at least, have some abhorrence of forcibly taking from the few and giving to the many without any sanction whatsoever. That would be raw dictatorship. But few people with this propensity feel any pangs of conscience if it can be demonstrated that "the people voted for it." Thus, those who achieve political power are prone to seek popular sanction for what they do. And, as government increases its plundering activities, more and more citizens "want in" on the popular say-so. Thus it is that pressures increase for the extension of the franchise. Time was when only property holders could vote or, perhaps, even cared to vote. In 1870 the franchise was extended to Negroes and in 1920 to women. Now the drive is on to lower the age from 21 to 18, and this has already been achieved in some places.

Frédéric Bastiat gave us some good thoughts on this subject:

"If law were restricted to protecting all persons, all liberties, and all properties; if law were nothing more than the organized combination of the individual's right to self-defense; if law were the obstacle, the check, the punisher of all oppression and plunder—

is it likely that we citizens would then argue much about the extent of the franchise?

“Under these circumstances, is it likely that the extent of the right to vote would endanger that supreme good, the public peace? Is it likely that the excluded classes would refuse to peaceably await the coming of their right to vote? Is it likely that those who had the right to vote would jealously defend their privilege?”

“If the law were confined to its proper functions, everyone’s interest in the law would be the same. Is it not clear that, under these circumstances, those who voted could not inconvenience those who did not vote?”<sup>3</sup>

## An Alternative

We can, it seems to me, glean from the foregoing that there is no moral or political or social obligation to vote merely because we are confronted with ballots having names and/or issues printed thereon. Has this so-called obligation of a citizen to vote, regardless of the ballot presentations, any more to support it than political madness on the rampage? And, further, does this not deny to the citizen the only alternative left to him—not to endorse persons or measures he regards as repugnant? When presented with two trimmers, how else, *at this level*, is he to protest? Abstinence from ballot-casting would appear to be his only way to avoid being untrue to himself.

If we seek more evidence than we now have as to the sacrosanctity of ballot-casting as a citizenship duty, we need only observe the crusading spirit of get-out-the-vote campaigns. One is made to feel like a slacker if he does not respond.

To rob this get-out-the-vote myth of its glamour, no more is required than to compare ballot-casting as a means of selecting representatives with a method *devoid of all voter judgment*: selection by lot. Politically unthinkable as it is, reflect, just for example, on your own congressional district. Disqualify all under 21, all of the insane, all illiterates, all convicts.<sup>4</sup> Write the names of the balance on separate cards to put into a mixing machine, and let some blindfolded per-

son withdraw one card. Presto! Here is your next representative in Congress, *for one term only*. After all, how can a person qualify to vote if he is not qualified to hold the office himself? And, further, it is assumed, he will feel duty-bound to serve, as when called for jury duty.

## Wanted: An “Ordinary Citizen”

The first reaction to such a procedure is one of horror: “Why, we might get only an ordinary citizen.” Very well. Compare such a prospect with one of two wrongdoers which all too frequently is our only choice under the two-party, ballot-casting system. Further, I submit that there is no governmental official, today, who can qualify as anything better than an “ordinary citizen.” How can he possibly claim any superiority over those upon whose votes his election depends? And, it is of the utmost importance that we never ascribe anything more to any of them. Not one among the millions in officialdom is in any degree omniscient, all-seeing, or competent in the slightest to rule over the creative aspects of any other citizen. The recognition that a citizen chosen by lot could be no more than an ordinary citizen would be all to the good. This would automatically strip officialdom of that aura of almightiness which so commonly attends it; government would be unseated from its master’s role and restored to its servant’s role, a highly desirable shift in emphasis.

Reflect on some of the other probable consequences:

a. With nearly everyone conscious that only “ordinary citizens” were occupying political positions, the question of who should rule would lose its significance. Immediately, we would become acutely aware of the far more important question: What should be the extent of the rule? That we would press for a severe limitation of the state seems almost self-evident.

b. No more talk of a “third party” as a panacea. Political parties, which have become all but meaningless as we know them, would cease to exist.

c. No more campaign speeches with their

promises of how much better we would fare were the candidates to spend our income for us.

d. An end to campaign fundraising.

e. No more self-chosen “saviors” catering to base desires in order to win elections.

f. An end to that type of voting in Congress which has an eye more to re-election than to what’s right.

g. The mere prospect of having to go to Congress during a lifetime, even though there would be but one chance in some 10,000, would completely reorient citizens’ attention to the principles which bear on government’s relationship to society. Everyone would have an incentive to “bone up,” as the saying goes, if for no other reason than not to make a fool of himself, just in case! There would be an enormous increase in self-directed education in an area on which the future of society depends. In other words, the strong tendency would be to bring out the best, not the worst, in every citizen.

It would, of course, be absurd to work out the details, to refine, to suggest the scope of a selection-by-lot design, for it hardly falls within the realm of either probability or possibility—at least, not for a long, long time. Further, only folly would be heaped on absurdity were one to advocate any meddling with the present machinery.

## Reform Follows Understanding

Why, if one believes mass voting to be inferior to selection by lot, should one not urge immediate reform? Let me slightly rephrase an explanation by Gustave Le Bon:

The reason is that it is not within our power to force sudden transformations in complex social organisms. Nature has recourse, at times, to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would

only be useful were it possible suddenly to change a whole nation of people. Men are ruled by ideas, sentiments, customs—these are of men’s essence. Institutions (social organisms) and laws are but the outward manifestation or outcome of the underlying ideas, sentiments, customs, in short, character. To urge a different outcome would in no way alter men’s character—or the outcome.<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, should selection by lot be so much as mentioned? Merely to let the mind dwell on this intriguing alternative to current political inanities gives all the ammunition one needs to refrain from casting a ballot for one of two candidates, neither of whom is guided by integrity. Unless we can divorce ourselves from this unprincipled myth, we are condemned to a political competition that has only one end: the omnipotent state. This would conclude all economic freedom and with it, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship. And even freedom to vote will be quite worthless—as it is under any dictatorship.

Responsible citizenship demands, first of all, a personal attention to and a constant re-examination of one’s own ideas, sentiments, customs. Such scrutiny may reveal that voting for candidates who bear false witness is not required of the good citizen. At the very least, the idea merits thoughtful exploration. □

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1. If it be conceded that the role of government is to secure “certain unalienable rights, that among them are the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” by what stretch of the imagination can this be achieved when we vote for those who are openly committed to unsecuring these rights?

2. Responsibilities of citizenship involve a host of personal attributes, first and foremost a duty to one’s Maker, duty to self, to family, to neighbors, and so on. Is it not evident, therefore, that voting is a mere formality after the fact? *It’s much too late to be a responsible citizen if the responsibility hasn’t been exercised before election day.* Everybody voted for Khrushchev in the last Russian election! Clearly, that was no evidence of responsible citizenship.

3. See *The Law* by Frédéric Bastiat, pp. 16–17. Obtainable from the Foundation for Economic Education.

4. One might like to disqualify everybody who receives governmental aid but, then, who would remain? The very bread we eat is subsidized. Those who ride on planes or use the mails, and so on, would be disqualified.

5. See *The Crowd* by Gustave Le Bon (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 4.