

The Power and Symbolism of Voting

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What does the Boston Tea Party and Gandhi's Salt March have to do with voting in the United States today? These were symbolic political acts that were effectively used to demonstrate against and defeat the same kind of powerful forces now corrupting American politics.

When patriots sneaked aboard East India Company ships in Boston Harbor during the night of December 16, 1773—and dumped tea overboard—they were creatively confronting corporate political power. Much like today, the Company had obtained tax advantages from the English government that hurt small colonial businesses. Even though the colonists had to pay more for their cup of tea, they demonstrated their unity against corporate corruption and political oppression.

One hundred and fifty seven years later, Mahatma Gandhi used another symbolic act to prove the weak can nonviolently resist a powerful force. The East India Company operated India as a corporate fiefdom for a hundred years before England assumed direct imperial rule in 1858. The government nationalized the Company's monopoly on salt and prohibited people from making salt—even for their own personal use.

When Gandhi announced he was going to walk 200 miles to the ocean and pick up salt in defiance of the law, the British officials laughed at him, and his own associates questioned his judgment. Starting with just a few believers, the symbolism of his march was not lost on the poor and downtrodden, as multitudes assembled along the way to cheer him on. Thousands joined him and watched as he knelt and scraped up bits of salt from the seashore. Gandhi was later arrested, and—as others peacefully joined him in breaking the law—more than 80,000 were jailed. The simple act of gathering salt generated the mass movement that defeated the Empire and led to the independence of India.

Today, in the United States, the government is dominated by powerful corporations, which have no loyalty to the nation or its people. They control the presidency and congress—irrespective of who is elected. If the American people continue to follow party lines and vote on computers, they will go on electing empty suits who serve their corporate benefactors—rather than the voters.

Half of all eligible voters do not vote, and those who do are forced to choose from among candidates whose campaigns are largely financed by corporations. Withheld or cast, the vote is increasingly worthless. If representative democracy is to survive, voting must become expressive, effective, and valued.

A symbolic feat is needed, one that can be performed by everyone—irrespective of political

leaning—to take direct action against corporate control of the government. Rather than wasting their votes, people can take a moment to simply write in the name of whomever they most trust to represent them in government—whether or not that person is on the ballot! Even if voters support named candidates, they should still write in their choices. Nothing can stop voters from writing in anyone, including themselves. The power is in the act itself, and as a physical manifestation of liberty, it is magnified by the unity of action.

Voters can cast symbolic votes—even with computerized voting—by creating their own paper ballots to deposit at the polls. What matters is not whether the ballots are counted, but the breadth and depth of the protest. If enough people cast votes of conscience, corporate candidates will fail to achieve the stamp of legitimacy required to validate their election.

Use of symbolic acts to demonstrate against corrupt power requires imagination *and* courage. Voters have to look beyond the immediate effect to see the long-term benefit of engaging in a nonviolent, peaceful protest against politics as usual. Seventeen years passed before Gandhi's symbolic act of gathering salt resulted in the independence of India.

As an emblem of their consent to be governed, the American people must firmly grasp their vote in their hands and feel the radiance of its power. The manner in which they vote, or fail to vote, and the consistency of their effort, will determine whether they will achieve control over their government. The choice is theirs, but they can take heart from Gandhi, who said, after many failures, there was no such word as defeat in his vocabulary.

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