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On Elections & Abstention (Part 1) (Online Article)

Historical Note

This online article was published on the website '[The Justice Project](#)' in February 2021.

It was later republished on the website of the [group 1917](#).

Content

ON ELECTIONS & ABSEPTION (PART 1)

February 22, 2021

We are 3 months away from the next general election, and, as always before an election, we are almost daily receiving calls and exhortations to vote. The content of the appeals varies from appeal to appeal, but they all have one thing in common: they express the view that voting is a political act with a significant social impact. We are constantly hearing that voting is the ultimate political act in a democracy, that it is how we exercise our democratic right as citizens of a democratic country, and that it is the main - if not the only - way if we want to influence the political events of our country. In essence, what we are being told is that democracy equals holding elections at regular intervals.

All calls to vote condemn, directly or indirectly, abstention. Abstention is condemned as a renunciation of your democratic right and an act of political indifference. According to this logic, if you do not vote, you waive your right to be heard as a citizen of a democratic country, leaving others to decide for you, whereas when you vote, you decide the future of your country. It is also condemned as indirect support for the already elected government, or whoever is the favourite in the elections. A recent meme that went around says that "Abstention is tolerance" (meaning tolerance of the elected Anastasiades government). According to this logic, anyone who does not vote against the government is indirectly accepting it. Elections in this way qualify as the main opportunity for citizens to oppose the government.

On the other hand, there are some people -mainly anarchists- who declare themselves to be supporters of abstinence as a political act. These individuals oppose bourgeois democracy and argue that voting in elections legitimizes and supports this institution. They believe that when you vote you become complicit in the existing bourgeois democratic system, and therefore the morally and politically correct act is to abstain from elections. Change can only come from outside bourgeois democracy and its institutions, and against them.

In my opinion, both the proponents of voting and the proponents of abstention are making the same mistake: both wrongly believe that a citizen's attitude towards elections -participation or non-participation- is a political act with a significant social impact. Because of this perception, both place considerable value on elections, either by encouraging participation or abstention. This perception is wrong. One's attitude towards elections does not matter much, as it is usually not a meaningful political act - that is, an act with the potential to change society. This can only be done in specific circumstances, which do not apply in Cyprus in 2021. And I explain.

An act is political when it influences society in the direction that the subject who does it wants. It is an exercise of power or authority, and therefore implies such power or authority. To be a meaningful political act, then, voting or abstaining needs to have the potential to influence society in one direction or another - the potential to bring about social change. Do they have this potential?

Abstention has zero political impact. There are many reasons why citizens choose to abstain from elections, but the result of that choice is almost always the same: nothing. No matter how much abstention occurs, even if the majority of eligible people do not vote (which happens regularly in America), elections continue to take place and the political establishment continues to perpetuate itself. If you simply abstain from elections without doing anything else, you don't influence social reality in the direction you want it to go. Abstaining only makes sense if it is combined with other political acts, for example, by conducting an insurrection.

On the other hand, even voting usually has no real political impact, although it does lead to a change in the personnel who govern us. This is true because the parties and the political figures between whom people are asked to choose in elections have no substantial political differences. They all espouse the same ideology and class, that is, the bourgeois ideology and class, and therefore they all operate within the same political framework. Some may give a little more social benefits than others, or be less nationalistic, but in essence their politics are the same. Historically there have been exceptions to this situation, but Cyprus in 2021 is not such an exception. All parties support capitalism and its policy of economic austerity, strict anti-covid measures, and the so-called "national interest". Even on the Cyprus issue, where AKEL supposedly differentiates itself, we really did not see much willingness to clash with the dominant nationalist/patriotic narrative.

When the parties and the political figures between whom we are asked to choose have no substantial political differences, our ability to choose is fictitious. Whoever we vote for, the result is the same: the political establishment and its policies continue, with the only difference being a change in the ruling portion of the establishment. This means that people have no real possibility to influence and change the social reality: it remains the same no matter who they vote for. Those who embrace this reality are fine, but those of us who want to change it are deprived of options at the polls. The fact is that some politicians and/or parties are less corrupt than others. But that is not enough to vote for them if we don't agree with their political views and ideology.

End of the first part. Read the second part [here](#).

Phedias Christodoulides

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