

A Community Non-Partisan Voters' Guide 2004

**DON'T JUST VOTE—
GET ACTIVE**

**Voting is the least effective
strategy for having a say in
society. You can vote once or
twice a year, but it's what you
do every day that counts. Don't
abdicate your power to so-
called representatives—take
responsibility for the ways you
can change the world yourself.**

Voting versus Direct Action

People in the U.S. are preoccupied with voting to an unhealthy degree. This is not to say that everyone votes, or thinks voting is effective or worthwhile; on the contrary, a smaller and smaller proportion of the eligible population votes every election year, and that's not just because more and more people are in prison. But when you broach the question of politics, of having a say in the way things are, voting is just about the only strategy anyone can think of—voting, and influencing others' votes.

Could it be this is why so many people feel so disempowered? Is anonymously checking a box once a year, or every four years, enough to feel included in the political process, let alone play a role in it? But what is there besides voting?

In fact, voting for people to represent your interests is the *least* efficient and effective means of applying political power. The alternative, broadly speaking, is acting directly to represent your interests yourself.

This is known in some circles as “direct action.” Direct action is occasionally misunderstood to mean another kind of campaigning, lobbying for influence on elected officials by means of political activist tactics; but it properly refers to any action or strategy that cuts out the middle man and solves problems directly, without appealing to elected representatives, corporate interests, or other powers.

Concrete examples of direct action are everywhere. When people start their own organization to share food with hungry folks, instead of just voting for a candidate who promises to solve “the homeless problem” with tax dollars and bureaucracy, that's direct action. When a man makes and gives out fliers addressing an issue that concerns him, rather than counting on the newspapers to cover it or print his letters to the editor, that's direct action. When a woman forms a book club with her friends instead of paying to take classes at a school, or does what it takes to shut down an unwanted corporate superstore in her neighborhood rather than deferring to the authority of city planners, that's direct action, too. Direct action is the foundation of the old-fashioned can-do American ethic, hands-on and no-nonsense. Without it, hardly anything would get done.

In a lot of ways, direct action is a more effective means for people to have a say in society than voting is. For one thing, voting is a lottery—if a candidate doesn't get elected, then all the energy his constituency put into supporting him is wasted, as the power they were hoping he would exercise for them goes to someone else. With direct action, you can be sure that your work will offer some kind of results; and the resources you develop in the process, whether those be experience, contacts and recognition in your community, or organizational infrastructure, cannot be taken away from you.

Voting consolidates the power of a whole society in the hands of a few politicians; through force of sheer habit, not to speak of other methods of enforcement, everyone else is kept in a position of dependence. Through direct action, you become familiar with your own resources and capabilities and initiative, discovering what these are and how much you can accomplish.

Voting forces everyone in a movement to try to agree on one platform; coalitions fight over what compromises to make, each faction insists that they know the best way and the others are messing everything up by not going along with their program. A lot of energy gets wasted in these disputes and recriminations. In direct action, on the other hand, no vast consensus is necessary: different groups can apply different approaches according to what they believe in and feel comfortable doing, which can still interact to form a mutually beneficial whole. People involved in different direct actions have no need to squabble, unless they really are seeking conflicting goals (or years of voting have taught them to fight with anyone who doesn't think exactly as they do). Conflicts over voting often distract from the real issues at hand, as people get caught up in the drama of one party against another, one candidate against another, one agenda against another. With direct action, on the other hand, the issues themselves are raised, addressed specifically, and often resolved.

Voting is only possible when election time comes around. Direct action can be applied whenever one sees fit. Voting is only useful for addressing whatever topics are current in the political agendas of candidates, while direct action can be applied in every aspect of your life, in every part of the world you live in.

Voting is glorified as “freedom” in action. It's not freedom—freedom is getting to decide what the choices are in the first place, not picking between Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Direct action is the real thing. You make the plan, you create the options, the sky's the limit.

Ultimately, there's no reason the strategies of voting and direct action can't both be applied together. One does not cancel the other out. The problem is that so many people think of voting as their primary way of exerting political and social power that a disproportionate amount of everyone's time and energy is spent deliberating and debating about it while other opportunities to make change go to waste. For months and months preceding every election, everyone argues about the voting issue, what candidates to vote for or whether to vote at all, when voting itself takes less than an hour. Vote or don't, but get on with it! Remember how many other ways you can make your voice heard.

This being an election year, we hear constantly about the options available to us as voters, and almost nothing about our other opportunities to play a decisive role in our society. What we need is a campaign to emphasize the possibilities more direct means of action and community involvement have to offer. These need not be seen as in contradiction with voting. We can spend an hour voting once a year, and the other three hundred sixty four days and twenty three hours acting directly!

Those who are totally disenchanted with representative democracy, who dream of a world without presidents and politicians, can rest assured that if we all learn how to apply deliberately the power that each of us has, the question of which politician is elected to office will become a moot point. They only have that power because we delegate it to them! A campaign for direct action puts power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people from whom it originates.

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IF YOU HAVE BEEN CONVICTED OF A FELONY THIS IS YOUR BALLOT

An estimated 4.6 million Americans—1 in 50 adults—are barred from voting because of a felony conviction. 1.6 million of those barred from voting are people with felony convictions who have completed their sentences. African-American and Latino communities are disproportionately affected by the disfranchisement of criminal offenders—13 percent of African-American men are barred from voting. More than one third of the total disfranchised population are black men. In seven states, more than one in four African-American men are permanently disfranchised. Given current rates of incarceration, three in ten of the next generation of black men are expected to be disfranchised at some point in their lives, and in states that permanently disfranchise citizens with a felony record, as many as 40 percent of black men may permanently lose their right to vote.

Molotov cocktail

1. A makeshift bomb made of a breakable container filled with flammable liquid and provided with a wick (usually rag) that is lighted just before being hurled.
2. A martini with too much vermouth and not enough olives.

Nationwide Call to Action: **Don't Just [Not] Vote, Get Active**

We are calling for a national campaign to take advantage of this election year to emphasize the power of direct action and to present direct democracy as a viable alternative to representation. It will culminate in a nationwide day of direct action on November 2, election day.

On this day, people across the country will come together in groups both large and small to demonstrate the effectiveness of direct democracy as a way to make decisions without mediation or hierarchy, and of direct action as means to implement those decisions and create the kind of communities we desire. Those who wish to take an hour out of this day to cast a vote are welcome to do so; but we urge you to spend the remainder of the election day in creative experiments in self-determination and cooperation. At the end of the day or in the weeks that follow, people can reconvene and compare which approach was more rewarding and empowering: ballot-box voting or direct engagement without representatives.

Why This Campaign?

Elections in this country are the reddest of red herrings. Liberals have been so fixated on them as to forget most other means of applying power; losses in elections have demoralized and disempowered the Left in general. Anti-authoritarians, on the other hand, while claiming not to recognize the sovereignty of any officials, elected or not, have nonetheless developed their own mythology around voting, attributing to it the mystical power to “legitimize” authority figures thus elected. But it is not voting that gives power to politicians, just as it is not not-voting that could take it away from them; they have power because we place our power in their hands, because we fail to apply it deliberately ourselves.

Quite a bit of energy is squandered by liberals and radicals debating the old question of whether or not to vote; the answer, of course, is that it's the wrong question. For people to be able to focus on getting power back in their hands, the terms themselves have to be set anew. To sidestep the entire issue of voting, and instead focus all attention on the alternative ways to apply power, might save everyone a lot of wasted energy, and unlock the vast potential dormant in our communities, our relationships, ourselves.

The Strengths of This Campaign

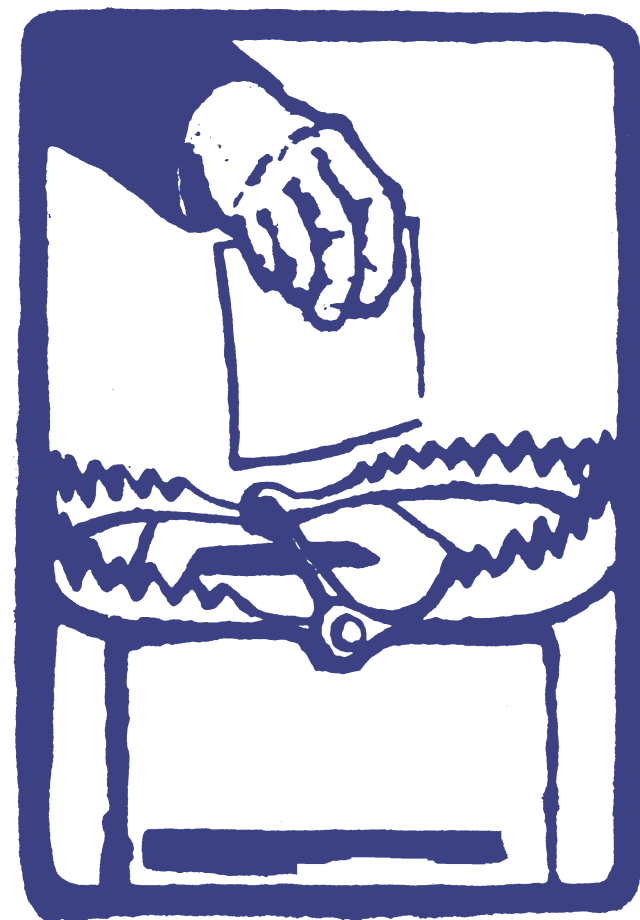
As a national campaign, this has strengths going for it that few others do. First of all, it addresses a subject that is already foremost in the public mind. By refusing to take a stand on the false dichotomy presented by the media, or even the other false dichotomy presented by traditional radicalism or apathy, it evades thoughtless dismissals. A campaign that declines to take sides but instead raises entirely new questions can be provocative without being alienating.

Second of all, it's both global and local. We don't have to try to get all concerned activists to come to one city to demonstrate around this issue; on the contrary, this is a perfect time for people to act where they live, while feeling connected to a nationwide campaign. The election is an event of global importance that takes place in every neighborhood, an excellent occasion for us to develop a corresponding political practice.

Third, the broadness of the general theme—direct action and direct democracy—is such that participation is open to anyone, with any preferred style of tactics, at any desired level of engagement. This is a campaign that everyone in a community can participate in: from a chapter of Food Not Bombs to a senior citizens group demanding better health care, from a high school social justice club to an animal rights action group. It is a campaign that can include numerous types of direct action and direct democracy: from free schools at the polls to guerrilla gardening that remakes or rebuilds local parks, from community monitoring of otherwise unaccountable police to civil disobedience that shuts down military contractors. As with direct action and direct democracy in general, and in stark contrast to electoral politics, harmony is the only goal that must be sought between participants; unanimity on specific strategies or objectives is unnecessary.

Election day will be a flashpoint for many concerns and desires this year. Afterward, we can be sure that people will retire from civic engagement in despair or relief—unless they've had a positive experience to remind them how much more they can do outside electoral politics. This is our chance to emphasize the political power everyone wields in their daily lives.

Join us, with your friends and neighbors, in whatever ways you see fit, in emphasizing the great things we can do when we cut out the middle man! Don't just vote—get active!



The idea is to dream up and practice the many ways we can take power out of the hands of the elite, be they elected or unelected, and redistribute it to everyone through a network of free communities and neighborhoods. We do not do this to gain control over others, but to attain control together—over how we provide each other with shelter, education, art, and information, over how we resolve conflicts, over how we share resources and ideas, over how we determine our own lives.

Invitation to Participate

This is a decentralized campaign. It belongs to no one, but all are welcome. Any individual or group that desires to participate is encouraged to take this text, rework it so it best expresses their views, and circulate it under their own name. The more different groups participate with different takes on the general idea, the better.

But What Should I Do?

-Paste up posters (see inside pages for examples), spraypaint thought-provoking phrases (“even without a struggle, you can get a lot farther than the voting booth”), drop banners over freeways, use every means at your disposal to give visibility to the idea that voting is the least important way to have a say. For posters and tips on wheatpasting, stenciling, banner drops, graffiti, and so on, visit www.dontjustvote.com.

-Link the work you do in your daily activism—Food Not Bombs, volunteer work, etc.—to the larger question of how to apply political power outside the voting booth. Add a literature table or DON'T JUST VOTE banner whenever your group acts in public.

-Hold a benefit show to raise funds for local action efforts. Book bands who connect their music to larger social issues, invite speakers who can do the same, set up literature tables.

-Set up educational events, art shows, film showings, etc. around this issue.

-Announce a “Don't Just Vote” get-together in your community, where local action groups can educate others about the work they are doing and solicit more participants, and people can discuss what local needs are not yet being met by community groups.

-Collect roadside campaign posters; invert them, spray-paint or screen-print your own messages on their backs, and put them back out in the world.

-Go ahead and register to vote, so you can put up stickers or graffiti in the voting booth to remind your fellow citizens where *real* power lies!

Contact us (www.dontjustvote.com, or P.O. Box 2133, Greensboro, NC 27402 USA) for more copies of this publication and other pamphlets, stickers, etc. related to this campaign, all ready to be shared in your area!



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