What If...No One Voted?

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There is a school of thought that claims Western industrial nations are democratic. The main proponents of that school include politicians, the mass media, corporate heads and most academics. Now, I don't know if that school really understands what "democratic" actually means, I assume they think it means it is representative of the wishes of all people, but in reality what democratic *really* means is representative of the wishes of just a few people privileged enough to be in a position to control power. Here's why.

In the past, the lack of representation was obvious: Greek democracies, for instance, gave decision-making powers to a small number of high-ranking citizens, in much the same way that a few high-ranking citizens now occupy the government houses of Western democracies. It was the same at the start of Western civilization (for the sake of argument let's assume it began in the trading nations of northern Europe), but very gradually a greater number of people were allowed to contribute to the process until, as we stand now, everyone has the chance to vote who should have. Or do they?

In most democracies you cannot vote if you are in prison (why you are in prison is irrelevant), are under the age of 18, do not have a static residential address or are not registered as full citizens of that country (this, of course, being a very moot point). According to one commentator, even that's not restrictive enough:

Voting isn't just a right that makes you feel 'part of democracy'; it's a responsibility and decision-making process. Because voters aren't just numbers on a register, but judges, and certain things make them better at it. One is age, which confers wisdom (usually). Entering the workforce, owning property, marriage and children also help, giving people a stake in the country's future stability.[1]

I think the inanity of these comments will become even more clear soon. But it's not just the absolute right to vote that shows "democracy" up to be a myth, look at the way those voters are represented. In the USA there are three separate pillars of directly electable power at the federal level, each one as absurdly unrepresentative as the other (think Electoral College or Senate District). In all other democratic nations there are similar gulfs between the individual voter and the person, or group of people (think Government Whips and lobbying) that purports to represent them. The vote you may decide to cast on a chilly Thursday afternoon is no more likely to represent you than a dog farting outside the polling station.

The same goes for those people whom Western media and especially Western politicians claim are fighting for the right to vote freely in "non democratic" countries. Witness the so-called Arab Spring, in which nations such as Egypt and Libya moved from despotic systems to, well, despotic systems, despite people having the opportunity to vote more freely than before. Nothing really changed because one hierarchical, top-down system was simply replaced with another. Wherever there is some form of oppressive power, be that religious, military-dictatorship or corporate, then freedom is just an illusion. Which makes any power vested in that voting slip or press of a button, just as much of an illusion.

And it doesn't stop there, because what is your *actual* opinion of what should be done by a representative system on your behalf? To be honest, even with more than a decade of liberated thought I still can't distinguish *my* opinion and that of the system under which I live. Take the lie of economic growth. We are told that in order for us to be healthy, happy and prosperous, whatever nation we are in needs to have a growing economy. We know that in order for more material wealth to be created then the state of the living environment has to suffer, be that in the form of habitat destruction, water and air toxification, greenhouse gas emissions, or any other form of despoliation you wish to name. Plus, in order for one economy to grow, another has to shrink, or at least do the dirty work of making money for another economy – hence the constant talk about competition. So we trot off to the polling station with the lie of economic growth ringing in our ears, and vote for whichever politician claims they are going to grow the economy more.

When was the last time you heard a politician canvass for votes on the basis of banning economic slavery or stopping all deforestation or there never being another indigenous tribe wiped out or, for that matter, stopping the global economy growing in its destructive way. You won't because that's not what most people want to hear. Just as "most people" want there to be fewer immigrants, and "most people" want more jobs, and "most people" want to buy more things cheaper than ever.

And that's the point. We vote because we *think* our views are our own and that those views are going to be represented. Well, yes, those views are going to be represented – but they are not your own, they are the views you have been taught to hold. The moment you no longer hold the views you are supposed to is the moment you realise the absolute futility of voting.

Not Voting

Not voting is really, really easy. In fact there are lots of ways of not voting. In my case I just don't register to vote, so I am never called to vote. Apparently that's illegal, but until I'm hauled off to prison then that's the way it's going to be. Another simple way, if you happen to be registered to vote, is not voting when you are asked to – a lot easier than going to the effort of voting. Another way, if you happen to be registered to vote and you are legally obliged to express an opinion, is to express no confidence in any of the options. Explicitly not voting is the same as expressing no confidence but it would be fun to see "None of the above" winning the vote once in a while.

Telling people you do not vote is not so easy.

A recent interview between BBC news presenter Jeremy Paxman and Russell Brand (usually prefixed "Comedian" as if that matters) contained the following exchange:

Paxman: "How do you imagine that people get power?"

Brand: "Well I imagine there are sort of hierarchical systems that have been preserved through generations..."

Paxman: "They get power by being voted in, that's how they get power..."

Brand: "Well you say that Jeremy..."

Paxman: "You can't even be arsed to vote?"

Brand: "It's quite a narrow, quite a narrow prescriptive parameter that changes within in the ah..."

Paxman: "In a democracy that's how it works."

Brand: "Well I don't think it's working very well, Jeremy. Given that the planet is being destroyed. Given that there is economic disparity of a huge degree. What are you saying? There's no alternative? There's no alternative? Just this system?"

Paxman: "No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying if you can't be arsed to vote why should we be asked to listen to your political point of view?"

There's a mindset in these so-called democratic systems that not voting is a negative thing, not an act of defiance but an unwillingness to want to be represented, or worse a desire to let down those people who fought to give you the right to vote. I have huge respect for anyone who fights for what they genuinely believe is the right thing, even if that may be deluded, but in the wildest of wild dreams has anyone *really* fought for the simple right to vote? Of course not. Emily Davidson threw herself under the King's horse in the fight for equal rights for women, not for a piece of paper upon which a cross can symbolically be made.

Brand's response to Paxman's last question elucidated this clearly:

Brand: "You don't have to listen to my political point of view. But it's not that I'm not voting out of apathy. I'm not voting out of absolute indifference and weariness and exhaustion from the lies, treachery, deceit of the political class, that has been going on for generations now.

It is imperative that we reverse the message that not voting is a negative thing. It *is* an act of defiance, but more than that, it is a clear message that not voting is a rejection of the existing system that does not, and never has represented the will of ordinary people. Whether not voting can, of itself, make a difference is another matter entirely.

What If No One Voted?

I contacted electoral offices in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and The Netherlands with a simple question: *Is there a minimum voter turnout that has to be reached for a national election to be valid, i.e. below what percentage of the electorate would another election have to be called due to insufficient turnout?*

In all cases the response was the same – there is no minimum number of people who have to vote in order for an election to be valid. Let me put that another way: regardless of how few people vote, it is assumed that a government is representative of the electorate. I have to imagine that the assumption behind this bizarre setup is that people had a chance to vote and if they don't then tough luck. But that's bullshit, surely? Any government that purports to represent the people, but which is not voted for by the majority of the electorate cannot have any moral right to represent that electorate, let alone the entire population.

Any government without a mandate has no choice but to rule by force, or at least mass deception. There is a word for this: *regime*.

So let's suppose that only a small minority of people vote for the party or individual that has power over them…hang on, hasn't that happened already?

In 2012 the population of the USA was around 315 million people. According to the United States Elections Project[2], of that population 241 million were eligible to vote by age. After taking away the prison population and other felony restrictions, plus non citizens (by choice or otherwise) there were 222 million people eligible to vote. Of those, about 130 million actually cast a vote. So

already we can see that the total number of people voting in the USA presidential election in 2012 was *41% of the population*. This is by no means exceptional, with voter turnout ranging from 57.1% down to 49% since 1971 – the year voting age was lowered to 18 – 40% of the total number of people actually voting is about average. And then, of course, we look at who won the elections, i.e. who has, or at least represents who has power.[3] Due to the weird nature of the Electoral College system, you can be President with less than 50% of the popular vote (in fact it's not really that weird, with more parties the percentage could be even lower), and in 2012 President Obama was elected by only 65.9 million people, or *just 21% of the population of the USA.* How unrepresentative is that? Yet, it's entirely typical of the voting systems right across the industrial "democratic" West that all give the illusion that governments represent the wishes of the people.

So, what if no one voted? It wouldn't be an awful lot different to the current situation, except there would be a huge number of empty polling stations and windswept precincts devoid of people willing to take part in the election charade. Plus, there would be an awful lot of people who have carried out a small act of rebellion, consciously and in opposition to the wishes of the system. Maybe it's symbolic, but for many people it might be the first time they have done something "unacceptable". It's a good feeling.

But I think we need to ask a different question. How about: **What if people didn't accept the authority of government?** Given that less than a quarter of people in any one nation are represented by "their" government, and that "their" government is bound by a set of rules that puts economic growth and capital wealth above the real needs of the planet and the people that live upon it, we are really talking about something more than withdrawal of mandate. There is no middle-ground – the systems cannot be improved, they never existed to serve the people, they only existed to serve the systems themselves.

Nothing less than complete rejection of the dominant systems of power will be sufficient to breach the immense moral void between what we need as a species, and what "democratic" governments impose upon us. Just one reason among many why we need to start undermining industrial civilization.