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Salon

The planet won't notice you recycle, and your vote doesn't count

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But you should do it anyway. The definitive guide to screaming at, coping with, and profiting from climate change

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Your vote doesn't count.

Put a group of economists in a room to debate the wisdom and virtue of individual action, and soon they'll be debating the value of casting one's vote: zero—in some strict, narrow, “economic” sense of the world.

It's a tough pill to swallow and runs counter to every call for civic duty, but we don't say this lightly. The chance of your one vote making the ultimate difference is so small we might as well call it zero. Some of the best research on this topic—by a team including Nate Silver of baseball statistics and, more recently, of FiveThirtyEight electoral prediction fame—put the probability of your vote making a difference in a U.S. presidential election at 1 in 60 million. And that figure includes the 2000 George W. Bush–Al Gore match-up in Florida. These are steep odds, to put it mildly. Even if your candidate were able to boost U.S. gross domestic product by $\frac{1}{4}$ percent in a given year, and we assume a very close election, your personal benefit of casting the decisive vote would still only be a tiny fraction of a penny. In other words: zero.

We can't leave things there. It would be both rather depressing and also rather narrow-minded. Maybe statistics and economics alone aren't the right tools with which to analyze one's personal action. Ethics, for one, plays an important role.

Why vote

Self-declared “rational” economists may continue to shake their heads in private and joke about how voting is one of these unexplained mysteries. It's not a mystery for the rest of us. We all know that voting is the right thing to do. Our military men and women pay with their lives for us to be able to cast that vote. It's a sacred right. It's the epitome of democracy. Not voting shows contempt for American—for human—values. We shouldn't just vote. We should rock the vote. Or at least we should display a prominent sticker declaring that we have voted, thereby coaxing others into doing so.

Your personal monetary gain may be zero, but that's beside the point. The point is to do the right thing, and voting is as simple as that gets. It doesn't require you to take your family to a soup kitchen on Christmas morning to volunteer. You don't need to pay extra to do it (ever since poll taxes were outlawed). Some employers even give you the day off. And you can express your opinion without having to do so publicly. You don't have to tell anyone whom you voted for, as long as you do vote. Civic duty fulfilled.

Academics have a way of complicating things quite a bit. Here's a shortened version of what Jason

Brennan describes as “the folk theory of voting ethics”:

1. Each citizen has a civic duty to vote.
2. Any good faith vote is morally acceptable. At the very least, it is better to vote than to abstain.
3. It is inherently wrong to buy or sell one’s vote.

Brennan then spends 200 pages destroying that folk theorem and arrives at a more complex ethical justification for voting. He could even live with people buying and selling their vote, but any old vote won’t do. If you don’t vote for the common good over your own narrow self-interest, don’t vote at all.

In other words: Your civic duty isn’t just to vote, it’s to vote well. It’s a tough argument with which to disagree. Vote for a cause larger than yourself. Vote for those who promise more than just to further their own agenda (or yours!). Vote for those who seek to look out for society at large.

Whatever that may mean in a specific case, it clearly goes beyond the not-sure-I-should-vote-I’d-rather-watch-TV reasoning. Get up and vote; it’s the right thing to do. And don’t just vote for the sake of voting. Vote as an informed citizen. *Vote well.*

That means thinking through the questions we’re asking in this book, and then seriously asking yourself whether to vote for candidates who will act on climate change.

Why recycle, bike, and eat less meat

Shift gears to reducing, reusing, and recycling, the mantra of every good environmentalist. The thinking there is roughly the same as for voting. Your single act of kindness isn’t going to change the course of history. Recycling won’t stop global warming. One of us wrote an entire book titled: *But Will the Planet Notice?*

No, it won’t.

The math is about as clear as can be, all without having to go through Nate Silver–type reasoning to guess how likely it is that your vote could decide a U.S. presidential election. Reducing your own carbon footprint to zero is a noble gesture, but it’s less than a drop in the bucket. Quite literally: the standard U.S. bucket holds about 300,000 drops; but you are one in over 300,000,000 as an American, and you are one in seven billion as a human being.

Every little bit doesn't always help. In the words of David MacKay analyzing the implications for the wider energy system, "if everyone does a little, we'll achieve only a little." So why go green at all? Because it's the right thing to do. It's also how we learn the values that we have to apply on a much larger scale to tackle climate change.

Recycle. Bike to work. Eat less meat. Maybe go all the way and turn vegetarian. Teach your kids to do the same, and to turn off the water while brushing their teeth. It's good for you. It's good for those around you. It's the right thing to do.

But do it well. Don't just vote. *Vote well*. Don't just recycle. *Recycle well*.

Recycle well

If individual, inherently moral acts of environmental stewardship—like recycling—lead to better policies, sign us up. The goal, in the end, is to enact the best overall policies that will guide market forces in the right direction. So if asking one more person to recycle more is the foot in the door for their going to the polls and voting for the right policies that are in the common interest, great. Ask people to "go green" in some small way like bringing a canvas bag to the store, and they may feel a greater moral obligation to do something about larger environmental issues. Psychologists call it "self-perception theory": see yourself as greener, vote greener.

Cue the virtuous circle of civic engagement, informed behavioral change, and all-around good things for a better planet: Voting well leads to better policies, which allow for a more enlightened citizenry; a more enlightened citizenry, in turn, leads to more people voting well. Recycling well leads to better environmental policies, which allow for a more environmentally enlightened citizenry; a more environmentally enlightened citizenry, in turn, leads to more people recycling well.

Call it the *Copenhagen Theory of Change*. Danes didn't wake up one day and decide to bike to work en masse through the bitter cold of northern Europe. Nor did Copenhagen's Lord Mayor wake up one day and decide to install a sufficient number of bike paths to get his residents out of their cars and onto bikes. Cars had dominated Copenhagen much like most other European cities for decades. It took the fuel crisis of the 1970s, increased environmentalism, and years of activism to go from "car-free Sundays" to over 50 percent of Copenhageners commuting by bike every day.

And biking isn't unique. The Voting Rights Act wasn't passed overnight. It took years of all sorts of

action—from the early sit-ins to the Selma marches. The U.S. environmental movement, which sparked the “environmental decade” of the 1970s, followed a similar path. Years of self-reinforcing activism eventually led to the necessary legislative changes, and the debate didn’t end there.

Time is the all-important factor. We once had decades to turn the climate ship around. Not anymore. That makes it all the more important to get our theory of change right. It’s also where we return to our recurring theme of tradeoffs, this time as it pertains to *recycling well*.

Economists deem the existence of trade-offs to be self-evident common sense. Psychologists add another twist to it, turning the effects of “see yourself as greener, vote greener” on its head. Call it the “*crowding-out bias*.” The threat of climate change motivates people to act—but only up to a point. In the extreme version of this effect, the “*single-action bias*,” people may do only one thing, like recycle, or put a solar panel on their roof, or buy a “green” product. This doesn’t necessarily mean that anyone, in fact, believes that one step is indeed enough to stop climate change, but that one step may be enough to assuage their worries and lead them to move on. Yes, the climate is changing, but women are still dying in childbirth. There are other problems to worry about, too, and now I’ve done my part for climate change.

Economists are instinctively more comfortable with this *crowding-out bias* view of the world than the one supporting the self-perception theory, a.k.a. the *Copenhagen Theory of Change*. After all, trade-offs often lead people to substitute one action for another. That’s particularly troubling when people substitute single, individual actions—like recycling—for larger policy actions—like voting. This phenomenon has been surprisingly poorly studied so far.

We know quite a bit about the mechanisms from collective action back down to individual ones. Setting the right incentives—paying people to do certain things—sometimes crowds out virtuous behavior. Pay people to donate blood, and watch blood donations go down, at least among women. Men seem to have no qualms about being paid for their donations, and women, too, increase their donations once again when the money is given to charity rather than paid out to them.

We also know a bit about substitution among individual actions. Ask people to voluntarily pay more for “green electricity” and watch some increase their electricity consumption as a result.

Both of these mechanisms support the *crowding-out bias* view of the world, where one green deed doesn’t necessarily beget another but may indeed be a hindrance in light of trade-offs in people’s

everyday behavior. However, we know little about whether the *crowding-out bias* does, in fact, extend from individual to collective action.

No one wants the *crowding-out bias* to dominate. It's something to avoid and overcome. If you catch yourself recycling that paper cup and thinking you've solved global warming for the day, think again. If you catch yourself buying those voluntary carbon offsets for the cross-country flight, feeling better about flying, and as a result doing more of it, that's not quite in the spirit of the exercise either. "The hotel changes my towels only when I throw them on the floor and the airline lets me spend \$20 extra to offset my carbon pollution? Eco-vacation, here I come!"

None of that is all that far-fetched, even for the most committed of environmentalists. You can't do it all. Plenty of environmentalists who recycle, refuse meat, don't drive, and generally try to do it all the green way still commit various other, often more significant carbon sins. Flying is a prime example.

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Excerpted from "*Climate Shock: The Economic Consequences of a Hotter Planet*" by Gernot Wagner and Martin L. Weitzman.

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