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The American voter is a gullible idealist

by Colman McCarthy

They overpromise and underdeliver. They promote themselves and demote their opponents. They propose plans that raise hopes and ignore facts that lower credibility. They grub for money that's used to hire staffs to grub for more money. They cite polls that are favorable and dismiss ones that aren't. They are men of wealth posturing as regular neighborhood guys. They enlist their wives to sweet-talk the media and happy-talk the crowds. All hail Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

On Nov. 6 the theatrics of presidential campaigning will expire, gratefully so. The mystery I have yet to solve is why so many millions of citizens allow themselves, first, to be sucked into the political miasma and, second, be complicit. How? By voting.

Four diamond-hard arguments can be made for the pointlessness of voting in presidential elections:

- The public is necessarily uninformed about the issues. The ideas of Libertarian, Green, Socialist, Communist and Constitution Party candidates remain largely unknown, either because of exclusionary rules set by the Federal Election Commission to keep them out of the debates or media insistence that it's a two-person race between a Democrat and Republican. Citizens who do trouble themselves to analyze the policy differences between the Socialist Stewart Alexander, the Libertarian Gary Johnson, the Green's Jill Stein and the Constitution Party's Virgil Goode find themselves cornered: be a principled third-party voter for a candidate who is a sure loser or be unprincipled and choose the lesser evil, Obama and Romney.

To fantasize for a moment, would the country be bankrupt by paying for two unwinnable and unaffordable wars if it had had Libertarian, Socialist or Green presidents these past decades? Would the power of money-driven lobbyists be as strong? Would social programs be underfunded? Would larcenous banks have had their way? Would unemployment, student debt and foreclosure rates be as high as they are?

- Due to an 18th-century creation -- the Electoral College -- that trivializes 21st-century elections, voters in a few states matter more than those in most states. Labeled battleground, swing or toss-up states, the election is expected to be decided by the count in Ohio, Florida, Nevada, New Hampshire and Virginia. Winning or losing a few counties in any one of those states can decide the national outcome. Sensible and workable legislation to eliminate the college that has been proposed in the past 40 years has gone nowhere. On another front, voter suppression campaigns twin with allegations of voter fraud.
- Pacifists and conscientious objectors to war are blocked from voting. Presidents take an oath to "preserve, protect and defend" the constitution, a document that sanctions war and armies (Article 1, Section 8) and empowers the president to be the commander in chief of the military (Article 2, Section 2). Or currently the drone bomber in chief. Those of us who decline to vote in presidential elections -- myself included -- might change our minds if evidence could be mustered that military violence has made the country more secure, more humane, less interventionist and less conned by leaders who think we can kill our way to peace.
- Genuine voting power has little to do with quadrennial drop-ins at polling sites. Votes are cast every day when we decide how to spend our money, time and energy. This is authentic democracy: participatory as against representational. Everyone is the president, of themselves, exerting moral power and spiritual power that promises to create a peace-directed and justice-based society, however long that takes.

Conscientious nonvoters can expect to be denounced as misguided purists, damned as addled elitists and derided as never-satisfied whiners. It's the opposite: The purists, idealists and whiners are those who keep voting but see fewer and fewer positive results. Let's praise them for their extraordinary faith but not their gullibility.

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