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## Election 2008 Special

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## Election 2008 Special

How important is it to vote in a presidential election in which it already seems there is a winner?

By Gleaves Whitney

I cannot say it emphatically enough: It is a citizen's duty to vote. In very close elections, every vote counts.

Recall what happened in 2000. In Florida, a state with nearly 6 million votes cast, Gov. George W. Bush beat Vice President Al Gore by 537 votes. That thin margin, combined with a 5-4 Supreme Court decision, is why America's 43rd president was a Republican instead of a Democrat.

Another extremely close contest occurred in 1960, when John F. Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by one-tenth of one percent of the popular vote. A few different votes in precincts here, a few different votes in precincts there, and the Electoral College map might have looked different and Nixon could have become president.

Momentum can shift dramatically during the final days of a campaign. Never count a candidate out. In the 1980 contest between incumbent Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan, most pundits were predicting that Carter would win. But on October 28th, just days before the election, the candidates held a televised debate that Reagan won. One week later, the former movie actor was elected the 40th president.

An even more dramatic turnaround occurred in 1948, when incumbent Harry Truman found himself trailing Republican Thomas Dewey. Truman headed a deeply divided Democratic Party. Challenger Strom Thurmond was siphoning off discontented Dixiecrats, while former Vice President Henry Wallace was appealing to communist sympathizers. Most observers believed Dewey would thrash the beleaguered president. The now famous *Chicago Tribune* headline, "Dewey Defeats Truman," appeared prematurely on the morning of the election. But Truman had the last laugh and got to spend four more years in the White House.

Under our Constitution, winning the total popular vote does not determine who wins the presidency. Because presidents are elected by the Electoral College, the results can be surprising and controversial. In several contests, the candidate with the most votes actually lost. This happened to Andrew Jackson in 1824, Samuel Tilden in 1876, Grover Cleveland in 1888, and Al Gore in 2000. But that does not negate the idea that every vote counts. What candidates must do is win states. In the vast majority of states, candidates need to win by only one vote to receive all the electoral votes in that state. In our winner-take-all system, one vote can make a difference.

I am often asked if it is a good idea to vote for a third-party candidate – sometimes as a protest vote, more often as an expression of one's values. This year, four such candidates are on the ballot in Michigan, each competing for your vote.

It is your duty to obey your informed conscience. But consider this before casting your ballot for a third-party candidate. In 2000, if any of the third-party candidates – Ralph Nader, for example, on the Green Party ticket – had withdrawn from the race and endorsed Al Gore, then the vice president would have won the election. In Florida alone, where Bush beat Gore by a few hundred votes, Nader received 97,488 votes – and the lasting ire of countless Democrats who believed those votes were wasted on someone who had zero chance of winning.

Third-party candidates have frequently played the role of spoiler. The current president's father, George H. W. Bush, may have lost his bid for re-election in 1992 because of the remarkably strong showing of Ross Perot, whose Reform ticket won almost 19 percent of the popular vote.

In 1912 a third-party candidate actually humiliated the sitting president. When all the votes were counted, Republican incumbent William Howard Taft lost to both Democrat Woodrow Wilson and Bull Moose candidate Theodore Roosevelt. It was the only time in U.S. history when the third-party candidate made a better showing than the sitting president.

Truth can be stranger than fiction when it comes to American politics. Never doubt that every vote counts. Who knows? Perhaps you will cast the ballot that makes the difference in Election 2008.



This essay originally appeared in the Grand Valley *Lantern* on November 3, 2008.



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*(Question from Jim Bonovich, Grand Valley graduate student in accounting)*