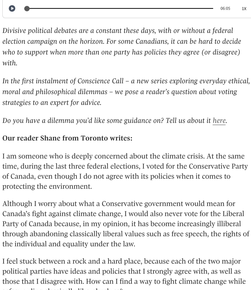


CONSCIENCE CALL

Right? Left? Blue? Red? How do I choose a side when no party reflects all my values?

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Divisive political debates are a constant these days, with or without a federal election campaign on the horizon. For some Canadians, it can be hard to decide who to support when more than one party has policies they agree (or disagree) with.

In the first instalment of Conscience Call – a new series exploring everyday ethical, moral and philosophical dilemmas – we pose a reader's question about voting strategies to an expert for advice.

Do you have a dilemma you'd like some guidance on? Tell us about it here.

Our reader Shane from Toronto writes:

I am someone who is deeply concerned about the climate crisis. At the same time, during the last three federal elections, I voted for the Conservative Party of Canada, even though I do not agree with its policies when it comes to protecting the environment.

Although I worry about what a Conservative government would mean for Canada's fight against climate change, I would also never vote for the Liberal Party of Canada because, in my opinion, it has become increasingly illiberal through abandoning classically liberal values such as free speech, the rights of the individual and equality under the law.

I feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, because each of the two major political parties have ideas and policies that I strongly agree with, as well as those that I disagree with. How can I find a way to fight climate change while safeguarding classically liberal values?

From the ethicist: Arthur Schafer, professor and founding director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at the University of Manitoba

In Canada, with our electoral system, we have just a few major parties and each is a big tent. They include people with very different interests and priorities, all working together under one banner.

Each party represents policies on a broad range of issues, and if you're looking for one that exactly represents your preferences and values on several different matters, you're likely not going to find it. You're never going to find a perfect match.

Most of us have several fundamental values, and we somehow weigh and balance those against the policies of a particular party. The question is: Which of your values should trump the others or be given the heaviest weight?

The weight you give those values can also change. In different circumstances, one value might deserve a higher priority. If we're having a crisis in our health care system, a party that's going to protect universal health care might become my priority. That may not ordinarily be at the top of my list – it might be the environment. But if universal coverage is threatened with collapse, I might vote for a party that has the best policy on protecting it, even though I disagree with them on other issues.

So ask yourself: At this time in Canadian history, and at this point in my life, what matters more to me, my family and my fellow citizens?

But how do you weigh two things that are both extremely important to you at the same time? Here's an analogy: You're trying to decide if you should take a job where the work is really satisfying but the pay is kind of poor, or one where the work is not fulfilling, but it pays really well.

The competing values aren't commensurable. They're apples and oranges. How do you weigh salary against work satisfaction? Yet, we do it all the time, such as when we're choosing a job, a life partner or where to live. We somehow commensurate the incommensurable, but it's mostly intuitive. There isn't an easy way.

In your case, there is another question worth asking: Are the two values you've identified really as separate as they appear? The issues aren't in silos. I would urge you to think about how your commitment to climate change is related to your commitment to freedom of expression. Look at the way the different policies you care about interact with one another. They may overlap and reinforce each other, or they may cut against each other.

Next, consider what you want your vote to accomplish. Ask yourself: Do I vote for the party whose policies and values are second-best because it's the most likely to form government? Or do I vote on principle for the party that embodies the values I care about, even if I know it's extremely unlikely to win the election?

You might vote for a party, even though you believe it's not likely to win. The purpose might be to send a message that you're someone who has this set of values. Or should you go for the second-best to minimize the harm done by another party you feel most opposed to?

There's a cost regardless of the strategy you adopt. By voting pragmatically, you may be voting for policies that you don't really agree with, in order to prevent even worse policies. But you're also reinforcing the likelihood that the best policies will never be on the agenda, because the people who favour them haven't sent a strong enough message.

I don't think there's any once-and-for-all best answer. It's going to depend on the circumstances. It's going to depend on you as a person. The question is what matters most to you under the circumstances you are facing now.

As told to Shawna Cohen. Responses have been edited and condensed.

Have an ethical, moral, or philosophical question? Share your story

As part of a new series, we'll tap ethics and philosophy experts to answer your burning questions about the ethical quandaries you're facing in your personal life, or the bigger moral or philosophical questions that leave you lying awake at night. Share a brief description of your situation or ask your question in the box below.

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