

The Cost of Engagement: Politics and Participatory Practices in the U.S. Liberty Movement

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A Case Study Report Working Paper
Media, Activism and Participatory Politics Project
Civic Paths
Annenberg School For Communication and Journalism
University of Southern California
December 10, 2012

Executive Summary

In the past decade, young libertarians in the U.S., or members of the Liberty Movement as it is called, have utilized new media and technology along with more traditional modes of organizing to grow their movement, capitalizing on the participatory nature of the internet in particularly savvy and creative ways. Still, the Liberty Movement is quite unlike more progressive, grassroots movements, with its organizations and participants sometimes relying on established institutions for various forms of support.

As this report highlights, the Liberty Movement represents a hybrid model, one that embraces participatory practices and interfaces with formal political organizations and other elite institutions. This case study outlines the:

- **Relationship between institutional supports and participatory modes of engagement in the Liberty Movement**
- **Choices those in the Liberty Movement make about their use of online/offline spaces**
- **Role of community in supporting learning and organizing through the Liberty Movement, despite members' active embrace of individualism**
- **Paths toward involvement in the Liberty Movement, including especially the roles of mentors and educators**
- **Political rationales shaping the decisions of many movement participants to prioritize political education over voting as a mechanism for change**
- **Internal debates around multiculturalism and diversity**
- **Emergence of a libertarian fandom around theorists ranging from F.A. Hayek to Ayn Rand**

In a letter to Richard Rush dated October 20, 1820, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “The boisterous sea of liberty is never without a wave.”¹ This report suggests that participants in the Liberty Movement would concur with respect to the challenges they encounter; largely ignored by mainstream media and pushed to the margins of the electoral process, libertarians have it tougher than many groups when it comes to the task of gaining voice and visibility in the mainstream political debate. This report examines how young libertarians confront such obstacles and presents readers with a detailed account of young libertarians and their relationship to the contemporary political landscape.

¹ http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/quotations-liberty#_note-8.

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Acknowledgements

This report has been made possible by a fantastic team of devoted scholars, colleagues, and friends, and I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge their help and support. Thank you to Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik for their tireless efforts, intellectual guidance, and careful proofreading. Thanks also to Joseph Kahne and the members of the MacArthur Youth and Participatory Politics Network, Mizuko Ito, and Jeff Brazil and Whitney Burke at the Digital Media and Learning Hub. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Amy Binder, Kaja Tretjak, L. Paul Strait, and Ellen Middaugh as well as the Institute for Multimedia Literacy at USC. I also offer my sincere thanks to Zhan Li, Amish Desai, John Gamber Thompson, and the members of the Civic Paths research group at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Thank you to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for their support, and lastly, to Students for Liberty and the group of fine young people who participated in the interviews for this project.

Exploring the Liberty Movement

On July 5, 2012, Gawker Media published a short “exposé” on Dorian Electra, a 19-year-old libertarian college student who, since 2010, has shared via YouTube a series of playful self-produced videos about libertarian and economic theory.²



Fig. 1

The article, authored by finance writer Moe Tkacik, skewers Electra, referring to her as a “Libertarian Lolita” and accusing her of being a puppet of the politically influential conservative billionaires, David and Charles Koch: “Now, where the conservative movement will probably never want for obnoxious junior Bible-thumping blowhards like

² Moe Tkacik, “Meet Rapper Dorian Electra Gomberg: The Libertarian Lolita,” Gawker, July 5, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5923731/meet-rapper-dorian-electra-gomberg-the-libertarian-lolita>.

Jonathan Krohn, Gomberg/Electra is the product of a much more delicate and nuanced decades-long project to make right wing ideology hipster-friendly.”³

Among the inaccuracies in Tkacik’s piece are the notions that libertarianism is associated primarily with right-wing ideology and that media producers like Electra must necessarily be agency-less pawns in a larger game of power and politics⁴. While Tkacik eludes to a “nuanced decades-long project” to make conservative ideology appealing to young people, and young women in particular, her piece actually misses the nuance of American libertarianism altogether, offering a disappointingly simplistic critique.

Based on almost a year of ethnographic work, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, this report seeks to unpack some of the more pervasive misconceptions about young libertarians like Dorian Electra and to give a detailed account of what participants call the Liberty Movement. This is not to say there is no room for critique here, but this case study reveals just how complex and multi-faceted young libertarians are. Some in the Liberty Movement engage with institutionalized politics, as has been the case for Ron Paul and Gary Johnson supporters, while many others reject electoral politics. Libertarian organizations and sometimes individual participants benefit from money and other forms of support from wealthy donors and established political groups, but many of these groups simultaneously offer fertile spaces for members to participate in more grassroots

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ In fact, Electra has recently shied away from labeling herself a libertarian. In a followup conversation after my interview with her, she explained that she wholeheartedly embraces free market economics but worries that referring to herself as a libertarian could be somewhat limiting with regard to her other creative pursuits.

activities.⁵ These practices tap young libertarians' engagement in participatory cultures, which, as defined by Henry Jenkins, offer:

- Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
- Strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
- Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices⁶

Additionally, members of participatory cultures believe that their contributions matter and feel some degree of shared social connection. Students for Liberty (SFL), the central organization in this case study, can be characterized by a *mixture* of formal and informal, bureaucratic and participatory structures. This report will highlight those conflicting pulls, along with the achievements, struggles, and contradictions defining the Liberty Movement.

About the Case Study

Methods

The methods I utilized for this case study included analyzing a range of media artifacts and texts on a variety of platforms (YouTube and Vimeo videos, websites, blogs, etc.). I also conducted participant observation at a regional Students for Liberty conference at Pepperdine University in November 2011 and the Students for Liberty International Conference in Washington, D.C. in February 2012. The core data in this report is taken from

⁵ For more on participatory practices as related to civic organizations, see: Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Sangita Shresthova, "Learning through Practice: Participatory Culture Civics," Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, MacArthur Foundation (2012).

http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/Learning%20Through%20Practice_Kligler-Shresthova_Oct-2-2012.pdf

⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (White Paper), 2006. See:

[http://digitallearning.macfound.org/site/c.en\]LKQNIFiG/b.2108773/apps/nl/content2.asp?content_id={CD911571-0240-4714-A93B-1D0C07C7B6C1}¬oc=1](http://digitallearning.macfound.org/site/c.en]LKQNIFiG/b.2108773/apps/nl/content2.asp?content_id={CD911571-0240-4714-A93B-1D0C07C7B6C1}¬oc=1).

in-depth interviews with 30 young libertarians mostly between the ages of 15 and 25.⁷ Pseudonyms were used for all participants in the study with the exception of three who participated in “expert” interviews and consented to being identified by name.⁸

The Liberty Movement

The vast majority of the people I interviewed considered themselves part of the Liberty Movement. This movement includes those involved in “Big L” Libertarians politics, meaning those who have an investment in electoral politics, either through the Ron Paul campaign (Paul ran as a Republican in the 2012 presidential primaries but holds many libertarian beliefs) or the Libertarian Party (Gary Johnson was the LP’s presidential candidate for 2012); but the Liberty Movement also includes “little l” libertarians, who seek to effect social change through educational and discursive means rather than electoral ones. [Libertarianism.com](http://www.libertarianism.com), a libertarian educational website, describes The Liberty Movement as:

The loose association of think tanks, activist organizations, political parties, and individuals who work to promote the ideas of free markets, civil liberties, and limited government across the globe.⁹

Under these terms, the Liberty Movement is a broadly encompassing movement that houses anyone interested in “advancing liberty,” despite political affiliation, with participants ranging from Tea Partiers to Occupy Wall Street supporters, and including not only libertarians but also Independents and Republicans.¹⁰

⁷ See Appendix on Methodological Considerations for more detail on participants, sampling, and interview methods.

⁸ Participants selected their own pseudonyms in some instances.

⁹ See: <http://www.libertarianism.com>. “The Liberty Movement,” accessed June 20, 2012, http://www.libertarianism.com/content/the-liberty-movement/lib_mov.

¹⁰ I have yet to encounter anyone who identifies as a Democrat libertarian, but under this wide-reaching definition of the Liberty Movement, the possibility for such identification exists.

While individuals of all ages participate in the Liberty Movement, it is largely youth-driven. In a July 2012 interview with the *Huffington Post*, Alexander McCobin, executive director and co-founder of

*"This is the most libertarian generation that's ever existed, and it's because libertarianism is just correct."
-Alexander McCobin*

Students for Liberty stated, "This is the most libertarian generation that's ever existed, and it's because libertarianism is just correct."¹¹ McCobin's sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, with participants often describing libertarianism as the most "rational" or "logical" political ideology, and journalists have shed a good deal of ink on how and why Millennials are more libertarian than past generations.¹²

Students for Liberty

Students for Liberty (SFL) is the central organization in this case study; the Media Activism and Participatory Politics (MAPP) research project received consent from SFL to be featured in the study, and the majority of participants had some affiliation with SFL (though not all). Students involved with SFL are often self-identified libertarians, though the organization as a whole maintains the broader mission of "advancing liberty," a concept which is most often used to describe protecting individual freedoms but which can act as a stand-in for a wide array of causes. The SFL website describes the organization's commitment to liberty thusly:

Students for Liberty is an organization that supports liberty. SFL does not dictate the foundations upon which individuals justify their belief in liberty.

¹¹ Pauline Arrillaga, "With 'Freedom' in Fashion, is Libertarianism Back?" *Huffington Post*, July 7, 2012, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20120707/us-american-pulse-libertarian-america/>.

¹² See particularly A.J. Dellinger's piece for *Salon*, which describes Gen Y's increasing social liberalism but decreasing tolerance for economic instability and irresponsible government spending: http://www.salon.com/2012/02/06/the_screwed_generation_libertarian_not_liberal/.

Rather, Students for Liberty embraces the diversity of justifications for liberty and encourages debate and discourse on the differing philosophies that underlie liberty. What Students for Liberty endorses are the principles that comprise liberty:

- Economic freedom to choose how to provide for one’s life;
- Social freedom to choose how to live one’s life; and
- Intellectual and academic freedom.¹³

SFL describes its mission as providing a “unified, student-driven forum of support for students and student organizations dedicated to liberty.” The following description of the organization’s history appeared on the SFL website before a June 2012 re-design:

The origins of Students for Liberty can be traced back to the summer of 2007 when several students in the Institute for Humane Studies Koch Summer Fellowship got together on July 24th to hold a roundtable discussion about best practices for student organizations dedicated to liberty...After the successful roundtable [Alexander McCobin](#)¹⁴ and Sloane Frost teamed up to take the success of this roundtable to the next level, to create a conference to pro-liberty students to meet and share best practices on organizing for liberty.¹⁵

Today, Students for Liberty is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose goal is to provide an abundance of activities, programs and resources to support students interested in liberty. SFL also serves as an umbrella organization for a growing number of [affiliated student groups](#) across the country.¹⁶

Key Questions

In this report, I address the following themes (and return to them throughout) in an effort to provide a nuanced account of SFL and the Liberty Movement. While the topics

¹³ “About,” accessed June 20, 2012, <http://studentsforliberty.org/about>.

¹⁴ For more on Alexander McCobin, see: <http://studentsforliberty.org/mccobin/>. McCobin is mentioned throughout this report, and his detailed interview quotes offer significant insight into SFL and the Liberty Movement. His long list of accomplishments are quite impressive.

¹⁵ “History,” accessed October, 2011 <http://www.studentsforliberty.org>.

¹⁶ See: <http://studentsforliberty.org/sfl-network/>.

addressed here are diverse, these key themes and accompanying research questions provide the central framing for the report and inform the manner in which the data are recounted and analyzed:

- **Tensions between Institutional Supports and Participatory Structures**-What is the relationship between participatory youth practices and more organized political practices within the organization/movement? How does the organization/movement capitalize on this relationship? Where does it fail to take advantage of it?
- **Role of New Media and Use of Online/Offline Spaces**-What role do new media play in the organizational mission and strategy of Students for Liberty and in the Liberty Movement more broadly? How do its participants use new media? How does it enable participatory cultures and politics? When and where is offline communication/networking privileged by organizations and individuals? When does online communication/networking take a more central role? How are online and offline spaces utilized for both personal and professional purposes?
- **Role of Community**-When, where and how is the concept of community articulated at organizational and participant levels? How are accounts of community expressed in relation to the seemingly individualistic ideology of libertarianism?

Institutional Support and Participatory Politics

In a 2012 survey report on youth political engagement for the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (with which MAPP is also affiliated), Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne elaborate on a phenomenon they call participatory politics, or “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.”¹⁷ The findings presented in this case study indicate that young libertarians are often engaging in forms of participatory politics, though they

¹⁷ Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, “Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action,” Youth and Participatory Politics Network, MacArthur Foundation (2012), vi. See: <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/content/participatory-politics-new-media-and-youth-political-action-ypp-survey-report>.

may complicate the definition in some instances.¹⁸ While engaging in participatory politics benefits young people in a number of ways, especially germane to young libertarians is this affordance described by Cohen and Kahne: “Participatory politics allow individuals to

Because young libertarians view their opinions as being largely ignored by mainstream media and political parties, they must often rely on alternative learning networks and forms of communication and circulation.

operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers of information and influence, such as newspaper editors, political parties, and interest groups.”¹⁹

Because young libertarians view their opinions as being largely ignored by mainstream media and political parties, they must often rely on alternative learning networks and forms of communication and circulation. Digital media is central to how young libertarians learn about the theory that informs the movement and important events.

Explicit in Cohen and Kahne’s definition, though, is the notion that participatory politics circumvent hierarchical institutions and structures of power:

These practices are focused on expression and are peer based, interactive, and nonhierarchical, and they are not guided by deference to elite institutions. The pervasive presence of such practices in the lives of young people is creating an actual culture shift. The participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one’s interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.²⁰

¹⁸ The Media Activism and Participatory Politics (MAPP) research project, for which this research was conducted, is affiliated with and supported by the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP). Kahne and Cohen are YPP members and released their 2012 survey report through the MacArthur YPP Network.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, “Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action,” Youth and Participatory Politics Network, MacArthur Foundation (2012), vi.

I argue that young libertarians are certainly engaging in forms of participatory politics, but SFL's organizational ties do complicate matters a bit with regard to how Cohen and Kahne conceive participatory politics as disrupting power relations.

SFL does have relationships, with varying degrees of strength, to well-established political groups, think tanks, and policy organizations, as well as to funders like oil magnates Charles and David Koch; The Kochs have ties to the [Cato Institute](#), FreedomWorks, Americans for Prosperity, and some causes within the Tea Party Movement.²¹

In *Becoming Right*, their forthcoming book on conservative college students, Amy Binder and Kate Wood make the point that well-funded, networked organizations play a key role in mobilizing conservative students.²² They give a detailed account of how conservative students benefit from the resources of the Young America's Foundation, the Leadership Institute, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which were expressly founded for the purpose of "advancing the cause of right-leaning college students."²³ These organizations grant summer fellowships, provide internships, and offer other forms of support for conservative college students and groups, resources that are not always available to students in more left-leaning "grassroots" movements. SFL is very much situated amidst institutionalized funding structures like those chronicled by Binder and Wood. Members are encouraged to network with a variety of libertarian organizations like [The Institute for Humane Studies](#) (IHS), a prime place for finding work opportunities,

²¹ See: <http://www.cato.org/>. Cato's executive board was embroiled in a scandal earlier in 2012 when the Koch brothers sought to gain increased intellectual and financial control of the organization after one of four shareholders died.

²² Amy Binder and Kate Wood, *Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²³ Binder and Wood, *Becoming Right*, 76.

making professional contacts and taking advantage of fellowships and educational events.²⁴

This meme, taken from the SFL Facebook page, features the sitcom *Arrested Development*'s Tobias Fünke (played by David Cross) pondering such an internship:



Fig. 2

SFL, as an organization, also benefits directly from its partnerships with established libertarian organizations. For instance, an SFL staffer indicated that the SFL central office in Washington, D.C. was located in free space offered by the Cato Institute.²⁵ Additionally, SFL partners with [The Foundation for Economic Education](#) (FEE), Cato, and [The Ayn Rand Institute](#) to provide a variety of free market-oriented books and literature to its members and students at campuses across the country.²⁶ SFL has collaborated with the [Atlas Economic Research Foundation](#) to publish three original books, *After the Welfare State* (2012), *The Morality of Capitalism: What Your Professors Won't Tell You* (2011), and *The*

²⁴ See: <http://www.theihs.org/>.

²⁵ Interview with Charles on November 28, 2011.

²⁶ See <http://fee.org/> and www.aynrand.org/.

Economics of Freedom: What Your Professors Won't Tell You (2010).²⁷ As SFL seeks to develop a global presence, transforming the Liberty Movement into a transnational phenomenon, Atlas has also sponsored essay contests for SFL and has acted as a major funder of SFL-affiliated African Liberty Students' Organization, the student arm of Atlas's own AfricanLiberty.org project.²⁸ These are just a few of many examples of how SFL has benefitted from well-established, networked, and funded organizations.

Prominent members of SFL have also received direct financial support from such organizations. Dorian Electra, whose work was discussed earlier, described being contacted directly by the "Koch brothers" and having her travel and registration for the 2012 International Students for Liberty Conference (ISFLC) paid for by them. She said:

They [the Koch brothers—she does not specify through which channels or organization] contacted me saying that they really loved my stuff and they wanted to support me however they could. They paid for my plane ticket to go to SFL, which is really nice.²⁹

Despite such displays as the one described by Electra and the numerous ways in which SFL and its members are tied to the aforementioned funding streams, SFL characterizes itself as a grassroots organization, which developed organically from a roundtable discussion organized by McCobin and his peers at Columbia University—an event which garnered such interest that he knew he had to start a national organization. When I asked McCobin, who volunteered to give a non-anonymized "expert" interview, why he thought SFL had grown so quickly since its start in 2008, he explained (at length):

I think there are a couple of reasons why we've grown so quickly. The most important one is that there already was a strong demand for an organization

²⁷ See: <http://atlasnetwork.org/>. See <http://studentsforliberty.org/past-sfl-book-publications/> for more information on SFL publications.

²⁸ See: <http://www.africanliberty.org/>.

²⁹ Interview with Dorian Electra on March 8, 2012.

like Students For Liberty among students. There were so many students who wanted something like this, who wanted to run their own groups, who wanted resources like our free books, speakers, networking these conferences. We knew this because we were those students. But no one had successfully done this before. So, SFL was able to fill this already existing niche that no one else was doing.

The other thing that I think has been really effective for us is that we've focused on empowering students to run their own organizations and promote liberty as they want to, instead of creating a top-down hierarchical organization that tries to get them to accomplish particular ends determined by an elite who "know best". The groups in our network are incredibly diverse. There are many different issues that students care about, different means of advancing these ideas that different students are more suited towards implement, even different strands of thought within the liberty movement that lead to interesting debates and discussions amongst SFL'ers. We, SFL's leadership at the more national and international level, just exist to empower pro-liberty students to do what they want. Providing with leadership training, general resources and even just encouragement and oversight to make sure they're being active instead of giving up or unproductive.³⁰

McCobin's explanation of SFL's goals and structure illustrates just how the organization is able to balance both participatory and institutional supports. While McCobin's interview comments never addressed all the assistance he's had from various libertarian organizations, one can easily locate information about those ties on SFL's website and at their conferences, where representatives from dozens of liberty-related organizations are invited to conduct sessions and panels and distribute information and literature. Moreover, because SFL is a 501(c)3 organization, they are legally obliged to disclose all financial contributions and are prohibited from lobbying. Everything that McCobin says above appears to be true. SFL *does* take pride in maintaining a horizontal leadership structure and has capitalized on a calculable uptick in youth interest in libertarianism. What's more, SFL has given those young people myriad opportunities to network with important figures in the movement, enhancing their academic and career goals, and, by focusing on education

³⁰ Interview with Alexander McCobin on November 12, 2011.

over party politics, has offered students an opportunity to learn about libertarianism in a much less dogmatic manner than one might expect. SFL openly affirms, even celebrates, a wide range of viewpoints, and this distinctly participatory/grassroots stance is where SFL diverges from the model of some conservative groups.³¹ All of this has undoubtedly been made possible, at least in part, by McCobin's own networking savvy and political acumen, along with that of his co-founder, Sloane Frost, who was not interviewed for this project.

SFL makes a clear effort to give its student leaders and members ample freedom and autonomy, but they also demonstrate the ability to provide more "top down" forms of support (many participants join SFL's Alumni for Liberty program after graduating college, continue to attend SFL conferences, and often take jobs or internships with libertarian think tanks and policy organizations in the Washington, D.C. area).³² This combination of supports has helped shape a movement in which participants remain excited about the project of furthering liberty long term, even if the goal is sometimes far from tangible.

Diversity, Equality and (Anti) Racism in the Liberty Movement

In the interviews, participants were asked how they would characterize the demographics of the movement. They were also asked to assess gender and racial dynamics in the movement and whether they believed the movement would benefit from greater diversity.³³ Participants' answers varied greatly; the majority indicated that they

³¹ Binder and Wood do point out that some conservative groups like the Young America's Foundation adeptly employ populist rhetoric, though this is more of a tactic than an underlying ideology.

³² Despite SFL's large professional network, they are far from a top-down hierarchical organization. That said, they do not have the same kind of grassroots history as, for instance, the [DREAM Activists](http://www.dreamactivist.org/) (<http://www.dreamactivist.org/>), undocumented youth whose activism was chronicled by Arely Zimmerman in 2012 for the MAPP project. See: Arely Zimmerman, "Documenting DREAMs: New Media, Undocumented Youth and the Immigrant Rights Movement," 2012. Available at: <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/publications>.

³³ See the Appendix on methodological notes for more information on how participants self-identified on a follow-up survey given after the interviews.

felt the movement was still predominately comprised of white males, but was in the process of becoming increasingly diverse with respect to gender and race. On the topic of gender diversity, Amanda explained:

There's pretty big gender discrepancy, and it's largely male. I would say 60% [men] to 40% [women] on a good day. Sometimes, it's like 70-30, but still, that's [increasing numbers of women] something I've noticed and something that other people have independently come up and told me like, you guys are awesome. I can't believe there are so many women here.³⁴

On the topic of racial diversity, Jude, an 18-year-old from a town of about 60,000 in Pennsylvania, explained the lack of diversity in his circle of libertarian friends:

I can honestly tell you that I haven't ever seen an African-American libertarian, not once. I can honestly say that. Now, I don't know how many there are out there, but for me personally, have never encountered one. I don't think I've ever seen an Asian one, so I don't know.³⁵

Lara, a 19-year-old attending a public university in Ohio, weighed in on encountering predominately white libertarians on her college campus:

I feel like it's [the Liberty Movement] predominantly white because I still think a lot of minorities lean towards the liberal side of things because of most of the social issues; like, I personally have never met a black Republican. That's probably the only reason why [the social issues], but at [my state university in the Midwest] it's really different. I mean it's mostly white people in the first place, so a lot of libertarians I know are white.³⁶

Despite the relative homogeneity of the Liberty Movement, a majority of the participants reported that the group was becoming increasingly diverse, a trend that garnered a great deal of enthusiasm. T.J. explained:

The ethnic demographics of SFL are much more diverse and, like, the student liberty movement in general is much more diverse than it used to be. It [the Liberty Movement] was [previously] all white men -- this rich white man's club. And it's not necessarily that the rhetoric was wrong. It's just that they

³⁴ Interview with Amanda on April 3, 2012. Note that pseudonyms are used for all interview participants.

³⁵ Interview with Jude on April 4, 2012.

³⁶ Interview with Lara on April 2, 2012.

were only targeting a certain element of people who could identify with libertarianism in a certain way.³⁷

Kevin, 16, also stressed that, in terms of race, young libertarians were usually an open-minded bunch, saying, “It’s a pretty diverse group of people and even the white ones you’ll see in there, you know there’s some straight up hippies. Not like these guys are middle class suits who just you know -- If not just a bunch of racists.”³⁸ Kevin’s statement illustrates how popular conceptions of libertarians hold that they are not only racist, but that they do not vary in terms of personal interests and self-representation. Anecdotally, my findings support his claim that a variety of individuals are involved in the movement.

The Value of Diversity

Still, libertarians from all backgrounds seemed aware that the movement is far from diverse. That knowledge sometimes showed up in playful or humorous ways online. This image, taken from the [Ron Paul Problems](#) Tumblr, acknowledges the sense of isolation some students of color might feel in the Liberty Movement:³⁹

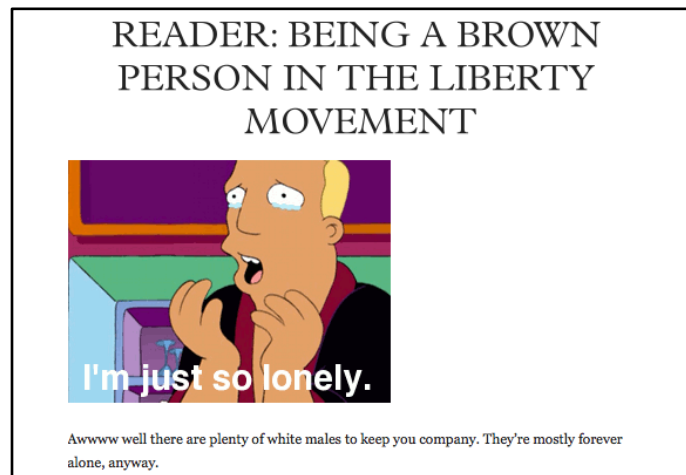


Fig. 3

³⁷ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

³⁸ Interview with Kevin on June 13, 2012.

³⁹ See: <http://ronpaulproblems.tumblr.com/>.

I talked to a number of young people who identified themselves as [Left Libertarians](#) or "[Bleeding Heart Libertarians](#)." Left Libertarians tend to have more of a focus on social justice issues (and use the term "social justice" comfortably, even though it is often associated with progressive politics) than others in the movement.⁴⁰ They often support mutual aid efforts while maintaining a focus on individual freedom. I found this group of individuals to be especially adamant about the need for the Liberty Movement to consider diversity and equality as main foci. Seth explained the need to take privilege into account, even though libertarianism is most often associated with the ideology of individualism:

I'm pretty well-privileged as an individual in American society. Like, I'm white, cisgendered, a male, middle class. Hopefully we'd get to a point where we could start being truly individualistic-- individualism is a good methodological tool in some regards, but if they [the majority of libertarians] apply it too strongly, they're sort of like, "Yes, we want everyone to be treated as an individual." That does sound like a very anti-racist and anti-sexist type of ideology, and it is, like their hearts are generally in the right place, but they forget that we aren't there right now.

So, it's really important to come to an understanding of how race, how gender works in American society and the world at large before we just skip all of that and just like this hand waiving and be like, "Oh, we're all individuals. It doesn't matter."⁴¹

Seth's assertions oppose popular discourses on multiculturalism and diversity from the libertarianism of the 1990's and early 2000's. David O. Sacks and Peter A. Thiel (co-founder of Paypal and noted libertarian) lambast "multicultural" and feminist curricula and sentiment on college campuses in their 1998 book, *The Diversity Myth*,

⁴⁰ See: <http://leftlibertarian.org> and <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/>. And learn more at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-libertarianism> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleeding-heart_libertarianism.

⁴¹ Interview with Seth on February 2, 2012.

brushing these efforts off as “political correctness.” They cite multiculturalism as an affront to Western culture and a threat to debate and dissent.⁴²

Seth’s statement is also a contrast to the opinion I heard expressed very often that the movement does not need to address issues of race (or the various privileges that can be tied to belonging to particular groups) because libertarianism’s focus on individualism is itself anti-racist. Michael, 16, from Colorado, expressed this viewpoint, saying, “If you focus too much on things like race and sex and religion then it becomes too much of a waste to kind of label people. So I think trying too hard to kind of appeal to a certain group just isolates that group...so if a black man wants to be a libertarian, then he’s not a black libertarian, he’s a libertarian.”⁴³

In a 2008 interview with Bill Moyers, Ron Paul explained that “libertarianism is the enemy of all racism because racism is a collectivist idea” under which people are unfairly categorized.⁴⁴

⁴² Sacks, David O. and Peter A. Thiel, *The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and Political Intolerance on Campus*. (Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 1998).

⁴³ Interview with Michael on June 18, 2012.

⁴⁴ Ron Paul, interview by Bill Moyers, January 4, 2008, *Bill Moyers Journal* (PBS). Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnPnAJeVuvw>.



Fig. 4

Paul's insistence that libertarians are anti-racist due to their focus on the individual was echoed time and again in the interviews. Bruce, a 23-year-old from Tennessee, explained that, while he does think the movement would benefit from more diversity, members try to look past race and toward the individual. He said, "We don't see people as different races, really. We just see them as individuals. So, that's definitely one thing that people should take into account. When we talk about libertarians, we see them as individuals, not as Black or Asian or anything like that."⁴⁵

Implicit in this focus on the individual is a dismissal of structural and historical forms of inequality in favor of a shared belief that capitalism and the free market will benefit all groups of people, including the poor and marginalized. Kevin, a 16-year-old from Michigan, described his belief that more education about the free market would lead to

⁴⁵ Interview with Bruce on March 29, 2012.

greater prosperity, which would, in turn, result in a greater understanding between people of all groups.⁴⁶

From a sociological standpoint, these arguments around the market and anti-racism may seem problematic, particularly the dismissal of historical and structural forms of inequality. These beliefs, though, are quite in line with the overall ideology of libertarianism, which privileges individualism and self-determination. Moreover, it's not just libertarians who feel this way, and the flattening out of various forms of inequality, particularly racial inequality, is propagated through a variety of popular culture forms. For example, in their book, *Enlightened Racism*, on the *Cosby Show* and the myth of the "American dream," Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis explain that representations of class on television, especially those spoken through the language of the American dream, discourage viewers from thinking about racial inequalities as rooted in a class system.⁴⁷

Gendered Experiences

The injection of discussions of inequality and social justice by left libertarians was heartening, though it was unclear from the interviews how mainstream that point of view is becoming or how much of a voice they have with regard to the direction of the movement. Further, while the turn in discourse was apparent, some participants' descriptions of their lived experiences in the movement suggest that equality has not been achieved yet. Consider my discussion with Ann on the topic of gender equality in the movement:

⁴⁶ Interview with Kevin on June 13, 2012.

⁴⁷ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 86-87.

Ann: It can be uncomfortable for women to go to libertarian functions. And I don't know if just libertarian because I've gone to conservative functions where I felt similar to this. And I'm sure the same is probably true at almost any political type event.

But just that when women go, it's often -- there's a lot of guys that are excited to see a woman there and so they don't necessarily engage you in philosophical discussions. It's more...

LGT: They're like hitting on you instead?

Ann: Yeah.⁴⁸

Amanda also described getting hit on frequently at libertarian conferences and events, but she said it didn't make her feel any less part of the serious discussion. In fact, as a former participant in conservative student groups, she described the gender imbalance to be much worse there:

I feel awesome being a libertarian woman, and I think what I mean, I am taken completely seriously in intellectual discussion or political decision or whatever. I have never felt like I've been told my opinion wasn't as valid or invalid or whatever. Actually, it's little different than when I was a College Republican.⁴⁹

With regard to experiences of young people of color in the movement, I heard nothing but positive accounts of racial dynamics. While there were very few people of color at the events I attended, those with whom I spoke described feeling welcomed and respected and, like others, reiterated the focus on the individual. The topic of sexuality did not come up often in the interviews; one participant identified as queer and described the movement as a supportive place, particularly because most libertarians support gay marriage and gay

⁴⁸ Interview with Ann on November 8, 2011.

⁴⁹ Interview with Amanda on April 3, 2012.

rights.⁵⁰ While the individual experiences and accounts of participants were positive, one of the main questions the movement seems to be grappling with revolves around how to diversify and whether or not that should become a primary goal.

Mentorship, Learning and Paths to Libertarianism

In this section, I recount some of the ways interviewees described adopting libertarian beliefs in the first place and discuss some of their paths for entry into SFL and the Liberty Movement. I then describe how they engage with both informal and formal mentorship structures once involved in the movement.

Many of the young libertarians described becoming interested in libertarianism through the influence of high school economics and history

Many of the young libertarians described becoming interested in libertarianism through the influence of high school economics and history teachers or home-schooling parents.

teachers or home-schooling parents. This libertarian influence of secondary teachers goes against popular notions that educators are liberally biased, a topic that received much debate after Students for Academic Freedom, an organization founded by conservative writer and activist David Horwitz, released their "[Academic Bill of Rights](#)"⁵¹ in 2004.⁵² That said, Horwitz's critique was launched at University Professors, not high school teachers (and especially not homeschooling parents). Scholarship on secondary teachers' influence on student political opinion more often focuses on how the institution of mass education

⁵⁰ Interview with Anika on December 5, 2011.

⁵¹ See: <http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html>.

⁵² Notably, Ron Paul [expressed his opposition](#) to the document before Congress in 2006.

can play a significant role in youth political socialization, especially when it comes to “creating” national citizens, and less on the impact of politically vocal teachers.⁵³

Homeschooling

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2007, 1.5 million students in the U.S. were homeschooled, a 74 percent relative increase since 1999.⁵⁴ I did not sample for participants who were homeschooled, but I ended up interviewing several young people who had been homeschooled for the entirety of their elementary and high school education or for a significant portion of it. Five of the 30 interview participants fell into this category. One other participant described dropping out of school at the age of 14 with the permission of his parents. He worked full time and pursued creative interests for two years and then enrolled in community college classes at the age of 16 to retroactively earn his high school diploma. He went on to graduate from a top tier college last year. Surprisingly, this instance is the closest any of the participants got to “unschooling,” a practice that is sometimes associated with libertarianism due to its emphasis on the autonomy of the child. In her work on unschooling, a progressive homeschooling movement that dates back to the 1970’s and stresses “child-directed deinstitutionalized learning,” Vanessa Bertozzi explains that unschoolers are encouraged “to radically question

⁵³ This literature on political socialization (and its relation to civic education models) dates back to the mid-20th century, but for a recent study, see: Alexander W. Wiseman et al. “Making Citizens of the World: The Political Socialization of Youth in Formal Mass Education Systems,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 41 (2011) 561-577. Accessed October 15, 2012. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2010.530764.

⁵⁴ National Center for Education Statistics “Fast Facts” accessed October 16, 2012. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>.

socio-cultural norms of access to and production of knowledge.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, most (though not all) of the homeschooled libertarians with whom I spoke came from deeply religious families, usually Fundamentalist Christians, whose brand of homeschooling is often held up as the counterpoint to unschooling. In the 2007 data referred to above, the number one reason parents gave for homeschooling their children was “a desire to provide religious or moral instruction.”⁵⁶ Moreover, not all of the homeschooled interviewees had parents who identified as libertarians (parents more often identified as politically conservative), but participants frequently described how their homeschooling created a personal openness to libertarian ideas.

Patrick, a homeschooled 17-year-old from Georgia and devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, discussed the link between his homeschooling background and his current libertarian views:

The homeschooling, I think, definitely did play a big part [in becoming a libertarian] because it left me open to a lot of different ideas. Somebody wasn't picking the ideas I got and the ideas I didn't get. I went out a lot and looked for ideas myself. That's kind of how I was taught—to learn for myself.⁵⁷

Herman, from Texas, now 28, whose mother began homeschooling him in the 6th grade, described his experience and speculated on the connection between homeschooling and libertarianism:

I didn't think that this [homeschooling] is what I wanted, but it ended up being absolutely magnificent. I think now I really would have preferred to have been homeschooled the entire time. I think I would be much better off in that respect had that happened.

⁵⁵ Bertozzi, Vanessa, *Unschooling Media: Participatory Practices among Progressive Homeschoolers*, Master's of Science Thesis in Comparative Media Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 12, 2006, pp. 16-17. See: <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/Bertozzi2006.pdf>.

⁵⁶National Center for Education Statistics “Fast Facts” accessed October 16, 2012. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Patrick on May 24, 2012.

Now that being said, the reason that's sort of important is that homeschooling is a—if you want to call it an institution, fine, but it is frequently made up of people who are already skeptical of certain kinds of government activity.⁵⁸

Patrick said that he felt that the majority of young libertarians come from homes where parents value education and discussing a variety of different ideas:

So I see more—the large group [of libertarians] I see is that people from backgrounds of being--not necessarily homeschooled, but having parents who are very interested in their education. It's [schooling] not necessarily at home, but when they are at home, they talk a lot about just ideas.⁵⁹

Participants also linked parents' rights to homeschool to larger concerns over individual freedom vs. government intrusion. They often described the belief that the government (state or federal) had no business intervening in matters of education. Some, like Edie, even had a history of activism around homeschooling. She described going with her mom to the state capitol when she was a girl to lobby on behalf of homeschooling families.⁶⁰

Although the link between libertarianism and homeschooling arose organically during the course of the case study, it should actually come as no surprise that proponents of a political philosophy like libertarianism would value homeschooling. Libertarianism champions individualism and alternative means of social change that often lie outside the realm of institutional and electoral politics, and homeschoolers, more often than not, support alternative forms of education that revolve around personal choice rather than state-supported schooling. Mitchell L. Stevens, author of *Kingdom of Children*, a foundational sociological text on homeschooling, argues that homeschooling's increasing popularization, along with the popularization of alternative schooling methods such as the

⁵⁸ Interview with Herman on January 6, 2012.

⁵⁹ Interview with Patrick on May 24, 2012.

⁶⁰ Interview with Edie on January 30, 2012.

Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches, is suggestive of a broader American cultural shift toward a focus on individualism.^{61 62} In the same vein as Bellah et al., Stevens asserts that the rise of homeschooling is indicative of both a cultural valuation of children's individuality, but also of a desire to move outside institutionalized structures of education.⁶³ He writes, "In all four approaches [homeschooling, Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia], children are assumed to have precocious inner beings whose individuality must be honored and celebrated. And all four approaches abandon conventional classrooms in favor of more flexible, less bureaucratic educational environments that give the individual learner more room."⁶⁴ The homeschooled libertarians with whom I spoke reaffirmed this notion, often explaining that their parents chose to homeschool them because of an interest in individual freedom and expression and a general distrust of institutionalized (read: government) education. Because of homeschooling's roots in this belief system, it seems to provide a solid basis for developing other anti-institutional strategies and practices, such as non-voting, and advocating outside the traditionally sanctioned space of "Big P" politics.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Mitchell L. Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001), 184-85.

⁶² Despite this claim, it is important to point out that, since many homeschoolers are Christian, they don't view themselves as islands; rather, they are part of a broader educational and religious movement. Additionally, homeschoolers from both the left and right often feel they are part of a homeschooling community, socializing and going on field trips, etc. with other homeschoolers.

⁶³ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Kingdom of Children*, 185.

⁶⁵ It is important to point out that several of the homeschoolers had parents that identified as conservative or independent, not libertarian. In the case of homeschooling, it seems the distillation of a particular belief system around individualism helped shape interviewee's trajectories toward libertarianism more than direct political modeling.

Teachers

While homeschooling parents educate their children outside of public education, some libertarian-leaning educators are choosing to work within the system. Many of the young libertarians I interviewed first became interested in libertarianism in college, but some participants described the impact high school teachers had on their ideological trajectory. Leyla, 23, explained that her high school economics teacher first got her interested in libertarianism and encouraged her to attend a university with a well-known libertarian-oriented faculty. She is now working on a graduate degree in economics.⁶⁶

Julien, 19, described how the debate coach at her private Montessori high school hosted a libertarian reading group for a core group of students who were interested:

In my freshman year of high school, I was doing a debate team. And there was our coach who now teaches in Guatemala at the Universidad Francisco Marroquín.⁶⁷ He sort of got us thinking about things and ways that we hadn't really before, be throughout the morality of taxation and, like questioning us and getting, sort of, getting us to think, like, logically. If we don't like force or fraud, and we don't think those things are good, like how that plays out, this system of government that taxes without people's consent, things like that. It just sort of like got me thinking about new questions that I haven't considered before.

Then I became interested in economics and he also happened to be the economic teacher at the school. Yeah, so there was a group of us that were like really into this on the debate team and stuff, and then we had like outside of the school reading groups with this teacher and stuff as well.^{68 69}

While interviewees often described being influenced by a libertarian teacher who seemed to successfully (and usually single-handedly) operate outside the status quo, the Liberty Movement offers both informal participatory structures and institutional supports

⁶⁶ Interview with Leyla on January 25, 2012.

⁶⁷ A number of contemporary Austrian School economists are based at this university.

⁶⁸ Interview with Julien on March 8, 2012.

⁶⁹ This is consistent with some of the findings in CIRCLE's "Civic Missions of Schools" report, which stresses the importance of high school civics and social science classes (and activities such as debate, student government, and newspaper) in fostering greater political involvement. See: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>.

for libertarian-minded teachers. On the participatory side, the Libertarian High School Teachers Facebook group, which had over 3,000 “likes” as of September 2012, serves as a forum for teachers to share ideas and informal curricula and activities and to commiserate about current state of public education.

With respect to more formal structures of support for teachers, the Institute for Humane Studies’ “Liberty and the Art of Teaching” workshop at George Mason University offer libertarian teachers an organized setting in which to gain information and coaching on course design, presentation skills, and leading class discussion, though the workshop is aimed primarily at university-level faculty and advanced Ph.D. students.⁷⁰ [These types of workshops are, perhaps, evidence of the history of “recruitment” strategies the aforementioned Gawker story by Moe Tkacik attempts to uncover, though I did not find formal supports like these to be very common, nor do they seem very “hipster-friendly,” as is the central point of Tkacik’s outrage.

Online Forums

In addition to the influence of teachers and parents, many participants described the importance of online forums, informational resources, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Tumblr for learning about and discussing libertarian ideas and meeting other like-minded individuals. Some of the interview participants described participating in the liberty movement *solely* online. The majority of these online-only participants were under the age of 18 and described lack of mobility/transportation as the foremost obstacle to participating in local political groups. Interviewees also mentioned other obstacles to in-

⁷⁰ “Liberty and the Art of Teaching Workshop,” accessed September 16, 2012, <http://www.theihs.org/teaching-workshop/liberty-art-of-teaching>.

person participation such as lack of money or parental support. Enzo, 15, from California, said:

Well, Tumblr is a very good place to find like-minded stuff and discuss, so that's where I met most of my libertarian friends. That's where we mostly converse and stuff. They have invited me to some places, but my parents won't take me because they can't afford it or it's too late or it's on a weeknight or something like that. It's kind of hard, so it's mostly online and stuff like that, and just talking to my friends at school and trying to convert them.⁷¹

16-year-old Kevin also participated only online, but was worried that doing so did not constitute “legitimate” participation for our study; he asked “what level of activism” I was looking for at the very start of our interview. Because he did not participate in any local groups, he was worried that he would not be a good candidate for the interview. I assured him otherwise, but Kevin’s reluctance to classify himself as a “real” activist gives a nod to popular discourses around “slacktivism,” including the notion that, while social networks may allow for increased participation, they don’t motivate participants to make real sacrifices for activism, as argued by Malcolm Gladwell in his much-debated 2010 *New Yorker* polemic.⁷² Embedded in Gladwell’s claim is also the notion that “authentic” activism looks like what took place in the Civil Rights or Vietnam eras and not what can be found online. While there are important points to be made about the value of “traditional” forms of activism versus more digitally mediated ones, the aim of this case study is not to parse out which *kinds* of participation are legitimate. Instead, it is part of a larger body of

⁷¹ Interview with Enzo on April 27, 2012.

⁷² Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010. See: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all.

scholarship that seeks to understand how engagement with social networks and online content encourages young people to become civic actors in the broad sense.⁷³

Of the five participants under age 18, four reported participating in the Liberty Movement in a majority online capacity, as did one of the 18-year-old participants with whom I spoke. While access was an issue for these young people, they still considered their political interests and aspirations to be a very important aspect of their lives. Even though they did not participate in local libertarian organizations, they described feeling very much a part of a tangible movement.

This finding also highlights what can be viewed as a significant deficit within the movement: a general lack of high school groups and clubs in which young libertarians can participate. Enzo explained:

There aren't really any high school groups per se -- I'm probably the only libertarian at my high school because either everyone is gung ho Barack Obama because it's the fad.⁷⁴ It's also the fad where everyone is just a Republican because their parents are. And so, I don't really have a group or membership or anything. I'm just kind of there.⁷⁵

That said, many interviewees saw the wealth of online forums, groups, and informational sites as one of the strengths of the movement. Benjamin, 22, explained:

You can see there is something much broader, where, like just now, where libertarians as a tiny minority finally have the tools. Tools like social media and stuff to really, really put out and what is now still an ideologically minority viewpoint in the world, and that's very empowering. And a lot of young people are already kind of flirting with quasi-libertarian ideas because they see the way that networks have worked and people collaborating and the wonderful things that come out of young people going

⁷³ Debates over "slacktivism" became especially heated again during the recent Kony 2012 campaign (and the drastic fallout surrounding it); see Neta Kligler-Vilenchik's particularly thoughtful essay on why we might not be so quick to dismiss online activism here:

http://henryjenkins.org/2012/03/why_youth_are_drawn_to_invisib.html.

⁷⁴ Notice the interviewee's usage of the term "fad" here. This again points to discourses around group mentality vs. individual autonomy that are so common in libertarian circles.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

to hacker spaces and all this kind of stuff. And to me, these are like very quasi-libertarian kinds of cultural forces, and I feel optimistic about that.⁷⁶

It is unclear why there is a lack of “in person” spaces for high school libertarians. Young Democrats of America (YDA) clubs are common in high schools, with over 1,500 chapters nationwide.⁷⁷ The Young Republican National Federation (better known as Young Republicans), with limited control over its state federations, does not publish statistics on the number of local chapters; but it is the oldest political youth organization in the United States, and thus has a well-organized leadership structure and resources to hold national meetings and events for members.⁷⁸ Libertarians have no analogous organization; SFL has a small number of affiliated high school groups but is geared more toward college libertarians, while [Young Libertarians](#), as far as I can tell, has no member chapters, and is more of an educational enterprise that seeks to collaborate with libertarian-minded professors to create online tutorials about libertarianism (which, again, points to the strengths of libertarians’ web presence).⁷⁹ This absence of high schoolers was also

Because the high schoolers I spoke with reported few in-person arenas to meet up with other young libertarians, they often engaged in conversation, debate, and socializing with like-minded individuals online.

reflected in the challenges I faced finding younger participants.⁸⁰

Because the high schoolers I spoke with reported few in-person arenas to meet up with other young libertarians, they often engaged in

conversation, debate, and socializing with like-minded individuals online. The Libertarian High Schoolers Facebook page was created by Jake, one of the interviewees, and moderated

⁷⁶ Interview with Benjamin on March 12, 2012.

⁷⁷ “About YDA,” accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.yda.org/about/>.

⁷⁸ “About,” accessed October 18, 2012, <http://yrnf.com/>.

⁷⁹ See: <http://younglibertarians.ning.com/>.

⁸⁰ For more details on this process, see the Appendix on methodological considerations.

by Michael, another interviewee. The page acts as a hub for young libertarians to discuss ideas and to post inspirational quotes, pictures, or memes that are intended to be humorous like the ones below.⁸¹



Fig. 5

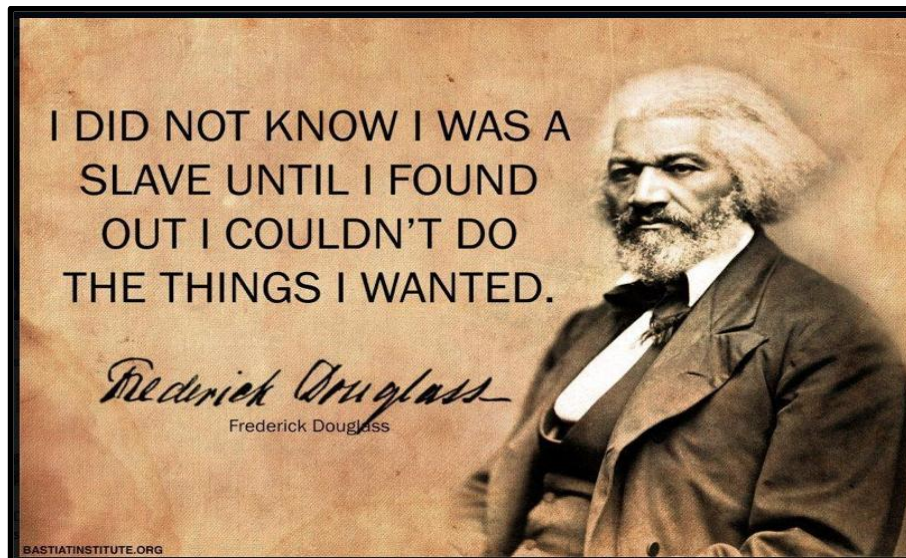


Fig. 6

Online groups like Libertarian High Schoolers offer these young libertarians opportunities to “hang out” and socialize with each other, but also an arena where they can engage in

⁸¹ “Libertarian High Schoolers” Facebook Group, accessed July 9, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/LibertarianHighSchoolers>.

peer-based learning and the exchange of ideas, resources and creative contributions.⁸²

Researchers from the [Digital Youth Project](#) found that some youth:

...use the online world to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community. Online groups enable youth to connect to peers who share specialized and niche interests of various kinds, whether that is online gaming, creative writing, video editing, or other artistic endeavors. In these “interest-driven” networks, youth may find new peers outside the boundaries of their local community. They can also find opportunities to publicize and distribute their work to online audiences and to gain new forms of visibility and reputation.⁸³

Despite this need for online learning and hanging out, many leaders within the Students for Liberty organization consistently privileged in-person networking, activism, and debate over online forms of communication. As president and co-founder Alexander McCobin explained, Students for Liberty values the internet as a means to advertise events and stay in touch with members, but it considers its regional and international conferences to be its “bread and butter,” a term that was used by many with whom I spoke in SFL leadership positions. McCobin argued:

A hundred screen names in a chat room is not the same thing as a hundred people in the same physical location here at Pepperdine [where the 2011 Western SFL regional conference was held, and where I interviewed McCobin]. But the Internet is critical to finding them and once this conference is over, it's going to be critical to maintaining the connections and friendships made between one another at this meeting. We're going to be using the Internet after this in order to organize future events, such as encouraging students to attend the International SFL Conference in February, to provide tips for organizing on campus, to develop and distribute resources to students, and more.

Thanks to the technological advances of the internet and today's technology, we are able to communicate more frequently and more easily with students

⁸² For more on “hanging out” as a genre of participation, or a mode of engaging with new media, see: Ito, Mizuko. *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009.

⁸³ See: <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/> and Mizuko Ito et al., “Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project,” White Paper, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Reports on Digital Media and Learning, 2008, p. 1. Available at: <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/files/report/digitalyouth-WhitePaper.pdf>.

all over the world, which allows us to help them, in-person, far more than we could've done without the internet. But community always comes down, in my mind, to in-person meetings, and that's why we at Students For Liberty prioritize our conferences so much: because you can't replicate this experience in the virtual world.⁸⁴

While McCobin and other SFL leaders described the importance of in-person events, the organization *is* devoted to fostering online learning, teaching, and discussion through efforts such as its student-run blog and its weekly webinar series, which I discuss later in the section on online communication and networking.

Formal Mentorship Structures

While participants clearly value the interactions that take place in informal and online spaces like Facebook and Tumblr, many also described the usefulness of more structured opportunities for on-the-ground mentorship and learning provided by SFL through its Campus Coordinator Program, Alumni for Liberty Board, and SFL Executive Board. Among these, interviewees cited the Campus Coordinator program as key in building their knowledge of liberty-related issues, developing professional and academic skills, and networking with other libertarian college students as well as adult leaders and scholars within the movement. Through the Campus Coordinator Program, SFL trains students (who are accepted to the program after a yearly call for applications) to offer support, distribute materials, and serve as organizational contacts for groups of campuses in cities and regions across the country. Campus Coordinators are given a great deal of autonomy regarding decision-making for their respective regions. T.J. described the program:

⁸⁴ Interview with Alexander McCobin on November 12, 2011.

As a campus coordinator, each campus coordinator--basically you can set your own agenda as to what you're going to do to advance liberty in your area as long as you're doing something for liberty, whether it's targeting, like, getting on the local radio or starting a lot of groups or however you feel like, you know. You're like an entrepreneur.⁸⁵

On the leadership side, Campus Coordinators are given ample flexibility, but that flexible model also extends to the campuses and students they serve; the program itself is designed to meet the needs of a wide range of students, an attribute on which the organization as a whole prides itself. In describing how the Campus Coordinator Program can meet the needs of both "Big L" libertarians (those invested in electoral politics) and "little l" libertarians (those more committed to ideological change). Ann said:

If a student is extremely passionate about the political process our executive board members or campus coordinators can make sure that they're connected to resources from Young Americans for Liberty [a 501(c)4 libertarian political organization, formerly Students for Ron Paul].

Likewise, if we have a student that thinks that the political process is just morally crap and they can't see any value in it, they may have resources for them. They're [the resources] strictly academic. So, it's more about, I think, reaching all of the different areas of the market⁸⁶ and making sure that all of the different, you could call them customers, are satisfied.⁸⁷

Several of the Campus Coordinators I interviewed described the ways they had benefited from the position academically, professionally, and personally. T.J. revealed:

The Campus Coordinator Program has, like, connected me with academics, which helped my grad school application search and my writing sample I had. So that kind of thing, it has helped my academics. It has helped my libertarian ideas because I go to these conferences or I'm always online with people and we're having these debates and so the argumentation gets sharper. The resources that you have as a campus group because of the network are so much more extensive. We get so many free perks because there are all these other organizations that are, like, working with Students

⁸⁵ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

⁸⁶ Notice how Ann uses language about markets and customers in her description of SFL student members. This goes to show how the language and theories of free markets/capitalism are really infused in their approach!

⁸⁷ Interview with Ann on November 8, 2011.

for Liberty, so we're always getting like free tabling kits or free books to give out, a free movie that you can show on your campus.⁸⁸

Along with helping participants with the abstract goal of furthering liberty, SFL's formal programs help students meet concrete achievements.⁸⁹

Online interactions can also be academically oriented and educational in nature. The learning and pedagogical model of Connected Learning holds that technology and open networks can foster learning in ways unheard of prior to the information age. Connected Learning, which is equitable, social, and participatory, involves three learning principles; it is interest-powered, peer-supported, and academically oriented. Moreover, it "mines and translates popular peer culture and community-based knowledge for academic relevance," a characteristic that is widely apparent in the online practices of the young libertarians with whom I spoke.⁹⁰ T.J., for example, has successfully parlayed his online interactions into both professional opportunities and critical skills with a focus on debate and rebuttal.

Online Communication, Networking and Participatory Practices

While I have already addressed some of the ways participants described the importance of digital media and online learning, there are still other ways the young libertarians with whom I spoke discussed using these tools to engage in the Liberty Movement, particularly as related to the process of community-building. The emphasis

⁸⁸ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

⁸⁹ Of course, one could ask whether participation in the Campus Coordinator program and its accompanying benefits is an equal opportunity pursuit. While it is difficult to answer this question, it is clear that many of the participants come from supportive (financially and otherwise) families, where highly involved/directive parents encourage participation in a variety of social and academic resume-building activities, an advantage which is distinctly tied to socioeconomic class. For more on this type of "concerted cultivation," see Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁹⁰ "Connected Learning Principles" accessed November 8, 2012. <http://connectedlearning.tv/connected-learning-principles>.

placed on online modes of participation by interviewees points again to the hybrid nature of organizations like SFL; they are institutional, organized, and at times bureaucratic, while simultaneously allowing for the development, growth and flourishing of rich and creative participatory cultures and practices like those found on Facebook, YouTube and Tumblr.

Online/Peer-to-Peer Mentorship

In addition to collaborating with and mentoring students within the formal structures and networks created and sanctioned by Students for Liberty, leaders within the organization also described the more informal kind of mentorship and learning that occurs online, particularly on Facebook. Madeline, 21, who holds a leadership position with European Students for Liberty, described the ways in which her Facebook habits have changed since she took the position:

Before I kind of got into the leadership position within the movement and really I just stuck to the people I knew and my Facebook was very closed and stuff like that. But a lot of the people that I collaborated with, I've never met in real life. And a lot of the people that I organize things with, I've never met in real life, so it's become so essential.

Once you take on a leadership position in an organization that's meant to be there to support people, people are going to reach out to you. And so, I get messages all the time of people asking questions about activism, about the movement in general, about events that are happening or something like that. And now, my Facebook is very open and I definitely -- it's used probably primarily now as a forum to support and mentor other people in the movement and to reach out to people. So it's kind of what my Facebook has turned into.⁹¹

Even those who do not hold formal SFL leadership positions described the importance of Facebook and other social networking sites in growing their knowledge of the Liberty Movement. This emphasis on online learning connects to the findings of the Digital Youth Project, which found that “some of the drivers of self-motivated learning come not from

⁹¹ Interview with Madeline on March 15, 2012.

institutionalized “authorities” setting standards and providing instruction, but from youth observing and communicating with people engaged in the same interests, and in the same struggles for status and recognition, as they are.”⁹² In this sense, the learning and mentorship that happens on platforms like Facebook affords participants more specialized knowledge, along with a network of contacts, that they would never find in more formal institutions.

A Sense of Community

In their work on the experiences of fan activists, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik et al. identify “sense of community” as one of the main factors that engages young people and sustains their involvement in activist organizations (they look at both loosely networked organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance and more hierarchical organizations like Invisible Children).⁹³ Many of the interview participants spoke of being the only libertarian in their high school, town, or college social circle and how isolating that could feel. Others talked about “feeling crazy” for being interested in libertarian ideas because no one else they knew had the same beliefs.

Many of the interview participants spoke of being the only libertarian in their high school, town, or college social circle and how isolating that could feel.

Benjamin, 22, described how participating in online Facebook groups, in particular, helped mitigate such a sense of isolation:

⁹² Mizuko Ito et al., “Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project,” White Paper, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Reports on Digital Media and Learning, 2008, p. 11. Available at: <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/files/report/digitalyouth-WhitePaper.pdf>.

⁹³ Neta Kligler-Vilenchik et al., “Experiencing fan activism: Understanding the power of fan activist organizations through members’ narratives,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

But it's [the Internet and Facebook groups like "libertarian truth squad"] also a big support network, and there's also this weird thing where you can go on there and realize, okay, I am not totally crazy. I'm not completely alone. Like, they are other people that see people--stop and freeze on the street--and say, like, "This is an outrage." Everyone else is walking by and doesn't care. I feel outrage. No one else seems to, but in fact, that there are other people out there that they're kind of like me and stuff like that. But it gets over the libertarian alienation or something like that.⁹⁴

Like Benjamin, many participants described feeling supported by other libertarians online.

Bob, a 17-year-old from South Carolina, described the importance of reaching out to young libertarians he doesn't know in person, or friends of libertarian friends on Facebook, in order to build a like-minded community, since he did not know any other young libertarians at his high school:

Well, I think this [reaching out to other libertarians on Facebook] is really important because you're probably not going to see them frequently at all and because the libertarians are such a smaller group, it enables people to get together. Whereas the Republicans or Democrats, it's so mainstream that people don't look for Republicans or Democrats or even care when they're adding friends on Facebook. So I think that because libertarian movements are small and that's probably a bad thing, but even though they're so small, it enables young people to be more connected.⁹⁵

Sometimes, though more rarely, participants came from libertarian-minded families or communities and encountered feelings of isolation when they attended college in a more liberal atmosphere. Andy, who is from Michigan and whose parents supported his libertarian interests from early on, explained:

It [retaining a sense of community] actually became more of an issue when I got to college when I wasn't in the local context, because one of the interesting things about Michigan that I guess people don't realize is that there's actually a really strong like libertarian undercurrent here. I don't know why, but you know, I've talked to libertarians from all over who are

⁹⁴ Interview with Benjamin on March 12, 2012. See also <http://truthsquad.tv/> for more information on libertarian truth squad.

⁹⁵ Interview with Bob on May 2, 2012.

originally from Michigan...So I appreciated that. I appreciated having that community while I was in high school and things like that. I didn't find it when I went to college. All of my friends were socialists. It was a shock. It was strange to realize that there are so many people who hold political views opposed to me. And so, at that point, it did become a little bit more important to me to have contact with people in other areas, to the libertarians online just to find that community elsewhere.⁹⁶

Spreading Ideas and Building Alliances

Participants also described how they used social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to build alliances, both with other libertarians who are interested in working with SFL, and with others with different ideological outlooks. Andy gave this lengthy and eloquent response on the value of connecting with others online:

I think it lends a greater understanding of the issues that we're advocating for to be able to talk about with other people. It makes your own arguments better. It makes your understanding of the issues broader and deeper. I think that's the really big value of being able to reach out for other people online now.

It's also been useful—to sort of have a better understanding as the movement of where we sit and who is included within that movement, because when you post, I've always found it--it's interesting to see who likes sort of the videos you posted, the different calls to action about whatever issue.

It helps us to form alliances, groups that we agree on maybe on one issue but not another, or that we have roughly the same ideas—so I think that's been incredibly useful, the sort of broadening and the alliance-building power that you get from new media.⁹⁷

Similarly to Andy, T.J. described how Facebook has given him and SFL as an organization access to a vast new network of other libertarians across the globe:

Primarily, I would say Facebook is the biggest thing that I use personally like most Students for Liberty. I mean, without Facebook, I don't know what SFL would be right now because we were able to connect with so many people. I've had people from Croatia send me messages on Facebook asking about starting their Students for Liberty chapter at their college, and the

⁹⁶ Interview with Andy on January 9, 2012.

⁹⁷ Interview with Andy on January 9, 2012.

crazy thing is that we have Students for Liberty people in Croatia that I was able to refer them to. (Laughter) So, it looks like, I just don't know how -- that's impossible without the Internet. So Facebook definitely, Twitter, same thing.⁹⁸

Time and time again, interviewees underscored the importance of new media and connecting online, particularly for building critical skills and knowledge, while some in leadership positions tended to classify it as playing only a supporting role to in-person networking.

Conceptions of Engagement

Defining Activism

While interview participants stressed the importance of Facebook and other online platforms to the movement, many still described the need to separate online activism from “in-person” activities and, at the very least, to employ a combination of the two. Alexander McCobin stated:

I think the Internet is an incredible tool to spread ideas and connect individuals. That's its greatest value: communication. You can be active online and be incredibly productive. Most of SFL's work is conducted via email and other internet-based communications. But if you don't translate that virtual activity into a real world activity, getting people to conferences, getting people to organize on campus, or having in-person conversations with others to educate them on the philosophy of liberty, that online activism means nothing. You can plan, coordinate, and inform from a desk chair, but ultimately, you've got to get people out of that chair. You've got to get them to actually do stuff.⁹⁹

McCobin's comments reflect his personal definition of activism. For him, one cannot be an activist solely online. Instead, activism must have an in-person component. It requires action in one's community, most often in concert with others. Many of the interview

⁹⁸ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

⁹⁹ Interview with Alexander McCobin on November 12, 2012.

participants, the majority in fact, shared his belief that activism requires face-to-face engagement. Most of the young libertarians with whom I spoke identified themselves as activists of some sort, though some rejected the term altogether.¹⁰⁰ When they shied away

***“If you don’t translate that virtual activity into a real world activity...that online activism means nothing.”
-Alexander McCobin***

from labeling themselves as activists, interviewees generally explained that it was because they did not participate regularly in “in-person” actions. Amanda described how activism should be defined as more than

“liking” something on Facebook:

For me, I think of it, an activist—like it’s almost like a citizen educator kind of thing. Like on large campuses whenever I would do activism, the source it of was about, like, raising awareness on a certain issue or drawing attention to a certain issue and knowledge. I don’t necessarily disparage people who are trying to raise awareness to things online... but I also understand that like clicking “like” on something doesn’t actually, you know, effect change.¹⁰¹

Amanda, who holds a leadership position within SFL defines an activist as a “citizen educator.” I would argue that this definition succinctly characterizes SFL’s view on activism as an organization; recall that their emphasis rests firmly with educating (mostly peers) on libertarian issues, not on influencing politicians or participating in electoral politics. This desire to educate and teach others about the importance of libertarian ideas was echoed by a vast majority of interview participants, but differences in opinion, especially along lines of age and level of involvement, concerned *how* the education could occur most effectively.

Enzo said he considered himself an “internet activist.” He does not participate in local groups since he does not yet have a driver’s license, but he talked about the value of

¹⁰⁰ In our interview, Dorian Electra did not talk in depth about her feelings on activism, but she has publicly rejected the term in other venues, citing her interest in education and entertainment over activism. See her panel talk at the Futures of Entertainment Conference 6: <http://www.convergenceculture.org/>.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Amanda on April 3, 2012.

spreading libertarian ideology online as a valid form of activism in its own right. He also said “netizens” were more likely than the general public to listen to what he had to say:

People on the internet are more accepting because they are more open to research these ideas than someone -- if someone in their car were to just drop by and see my sign, and they didn't agree with it, they wouldn't agree with it. But if I spread this idea on my Facebook wall, people will go, “Oh, is that right? I'll look it up and see if it's true or not.”¹⁰²

In his 1997 piece, “The Birth of a Digital Nation,” one of a series of essays about (and named) The Netizen for *Wired Magazine*, Jon Katz muses on the civic possibilities of the internet, which he claims is, by nature, libertarian:

The closest thing the digital world has to dogma is its ingrained libertarianism, its wholehearted commitment to political and economic freedom, its fierce opposition to constraints on individual expression - from the chilling fanaticism of the politically correct to the growing movement to censor popular culture.

The online world is the freest community in American life. Its members can do things considered unacceptable elsewhere in our culture. They can curse freely, challenge the existence of god, explore their sexuality nearly at will, talk to radical thinkers from all over the world. They can even commit verbal treason.^{103 104}

Many of the interviewees held similar beliefs and cited the libertarian nature of the net as especially relevant to important instances of mobilization, such as that which occurred around quashing 2012's Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA).

¹⁰² Interview with Enzo on April 27, 2012.

¹⁰³ Jon Katz “Birth of a Digital Nation,” *Wired* 5.04:Netizen, available at: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.04/netizen_pr.html.

¹⁰⁴ This stance was very popular among early “technolibertarians,” programming/web-savvy Silicon Valley contributors with libertarian views. But technolibertarianism and its tenets were not without criticism; *Wired* contributor, Paulina Borsook, in her 1996 article, “Cyberselfish,” for *Mother Jones*, offered a compelling argument for why technolibertarians wanted to “bite the government hand that feeds” and for what, in her view, was a deeply problematic embrace of libertarian ideology. The full article is available at: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1996/07/cyberselfish?page=2>.

While most of the interview participants privileged in-person forms of activism, they described, over and over, how online forms of debate, discussion, and activism could compliment more traditional forms. It was clear that participants very much valued activities such as protest, setting up tables on their campuses to distribute information and literature, and even writing letters to the editors of newspapers, something that seems almost a lost art form these days. Instead of viewing online activism as replacing these activities, the young libertarians most often spoke of how online spaces could help renew students' interest in becoming activists and expand their knowledge base.

Reinterpreting Politics

Because so many of the participants rejected engagement with party politics, they described becoming active in one's community and fostering close relationships there (both online and locally) as essential. What's more, most felt that those relationships could best flourish outside of party politics and away from the arm of government institutions.

Seth explained:

Our institutions don't really fit us very well. Like, I don't want to feel like an ant. I want to feel like a human being that matters, and having some institution that's supposed to fit 315 million or whatever, that doesn't really feel like it has very much to do with me. It feels like an external force that's placed upon me.

I like to support things like my farmer's market. I like supporting my local non-profits and local businesses. I like those aspects of community. I want people to organize in more cooperative ways. I like it small scale, and I like the sort of fluidity that libertarianism allows that isn't so static in a way that it approaches institutions. I like the evolutionary aspect to it as well.¹⁰⁵

This emphasis on community might seem somewhat surprising given the valuation most libertarians place on individualism, but libertarians have a long history of supporting

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Seth on February 2, 2012.

local/community-based decision-making. In fact, this focus on local autonomy is one of the core tenets of [Voluntaryism](#), a popular ideology within the Liberty Movement with roots in anarchist philosophy.¹⁰⁶ In *Radicals for Capitalism*, Brian Doherty explains that Voluntaryism was cemented in the 1950's as a reaction to Eisenhower "taking over" the GOP and was comprised of "unconstructed classical liberal peaceniks, anarchists, and near-anarchists such as [Murray] Rothbard and his friends."¹⁰⁷ [Rothbard](#), a student of the Austrian School's [Ludwig von Mises](#), could be characterized as a right-wing anarchist who, by the 1970's, sought to break from [Ayn Rand](#), especially regarding her views on the state.¹⁰⁸ Voluntaryism "holds that all forms of human association should be voluntary," meaning that personal freedom should never be impinged upon, particularly by state intervention.¹⁰⁹ Voluntaryists are also adherents to the [Non-Aggression Principle](#).¹¹⁰

In some of the interviews, though, the desire for personal or community autonomy was articulated in a direct (and often harsh) critique of both electoral politics and civic engagement.

I don't believe in civic engagement. I think it's probably more harm than good. I believe in a world where we can be totally ignorant of politics and it's okay, because it doesn't matter. You can live your life and it will be great and whoever wins the next election will not have any impact on what you're doing. That's kind of what I want to see. I don't want to see people get politically involved. I want to see people get politically uninvolved. I want the politicians to know they are not important. We don't like them, we don't want them around, go away.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ "Voluntaryism [Wikipedia]," accessed June 19, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntaryism>.

¹⁰⁷ Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 248.

¹⁰⁸ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murray_Rothbard, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_von_Mises, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayn_Rand.

¹⁰⁹ "Voluntaryism [Wikipedia]," accessed June 19, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntaryism>.

¹¹⁰ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-aggression_principle.

¹¹¹ Interview with Rusty on November 7, 2011.

While it is safe to assume that Rusty's statement is largely hyperbolic, his take on the brokenness of electoral politics and his general disillusionment with politicians was not at all unique. These sentiments were echoed often during the interviews—so frequently, in fact, that a very clear portrait of young libertarians' tenuous (but certainly not absent) relationship to electoral politics emerged by the time the case study concluded.

The Liberty Movement and Electoral Politics

It may come as no surprise that young libertarians are often very critical of “big government,” as decreased federal power is a central tenant of libertarian political philosophy. The young libertarians in this study were no exception, citing expanding government intervention into domestic, foreign, and civil liberties issues as one of the biggest problems facing Americans today. Participants also described government/corporate collusion, or “crony capitalism” as it is often referred to within the movement, and state control over the market as significant problems that led to or exacerbated the 2008 (and onward) recession. This video, produced by the Institute for Humane studies for Halloween 2011 (and around the same time the Occupy Wall Street movement-whose participants often shared the libertarian critique of bank bailouts-was gaining momentum) warns of the effects of feeding “zombie corporations” with government money:



Fig. 7

Notably, negative sentiment toward government has been growing among individuals with all party affiliations and among all generations in the U.S. A November 2011 Pew report on generational divides going into the 2012 election states:

Trust in government has fallen among all generations in the past few years. Just 26% of Millennials say they can trust the government always or most of the time, down from 44% in 2004. There have been comparable declines among Gen Xers, Boomers and Silents. In all three groups, no more than about one-in-five says they can trust in the government always or most of the time.¹¹²

So while the libertarians with whom I spoke were particularly vocal about their displeasure with the political status quo in the U.S., their discontent is part of a growing national trend.

¹¹² "The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election," accessed June 25, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/section-1-how-generations-have-changed>.

Interestingly, the majority of participants in this study spoke of disavowing electoral politics completely. While libertarian-leaning candidates like Ron Paul have gained momentum in recent years, a number of participants identified themselves as categorical non-voters, choosing to focus on educating others about liberty-related issues rather than investing in party politics. While I do not want to make the generalization that the majority of young libertarians take this stance, I was struck by how many interviewees felt this way.

Studies have shown that this viewpoint has gained traction not just with young libertarians, but with young people in general. In a 2007 report on Millennials and politics for CIRCLE, Abby Kiesa et al. found that “Very few students say that voting is the most beneficial vehicle for addressing public issues; in fact, voting by far receives the least support.”¹¹³ Kiesa et al. also found that, “students think that voting is necessary, but view it more as a “symbolic gesture” than a means of creating change.”¹¹⁴

Similarly, in a recent blog post on digital civics, Ethan Zuckerman suggests that those on the left and the right are increasingly moving away from legislative theories of social change, or an “old civics” model, and adopting a “new digital civics” that teaches us “how to raise attention for causes, how to use distributed populations to propose solutions to problems, and how to synchronize supporters around a strategy.”¹¹⁵ This adoption of a new digital civics applies to the young libertarians I interviewed, many of whom described having given up on electoral politics in favor of effecting change through alternative mechanisms.

¹¹³ Abby Kiesa et al., “Millennials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement,” The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2007. Available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CSTP.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Kiesa et al., “Millennials,” 15.

¹¹⁵ Ethan Zuckerman. “My Heart’s In Accra” blog, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/>.

Charles, 25, explained, “What really matters in terms of making lasting social change is the idea-and specifically kind of the general view of government and power that people have.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, Seth, a 23-year-old from Arizona, said:

I think most libertarians tend to think of it [libertarianism] as educational. They're introducing ideas to more people. The ways that Americans think about politics tend to be around election time and so they can't see it rather opportunistically perhaps. We don't tend to like the way of solving problems politically. We think the incentives are very bad and they tend to favor people that have the most power at the expense of everyone else.¹¹⁷

Most of the young libertarians with whom I spoke felt their passion for politics could be utilized in more efficient ways than through voting. Charles explained his belief that it is particularly important for young people to take up the mantle of education while they are still optimistic and care about issues like “liberty and justice, fairness and prosperity, and making the world a better place.”¹¹⁸

Ann, 23, shared her peers' ambivalence toward voting: “I just think that my time and energy can be used much better in other ways... I, in no way, I guess, discredit the voting process. It's just not something that is worth it right now for me to engage in.”¹¹⁹ Ann's explanation that voting is not “worth it” can be viewed as a kind of cost-benefit analysis of electoral engagement. She went on to say that the cost of taking the time to register, educate herself about the candidate, and go to the polls did not make it worthwhile to vote (which she saw as providing little benefit to her personally and having little impact on the outcome of the election).

¹¹⁶ Interview with Charles on November 28, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Seth on February 2, 2012.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Charles on November 28, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Ann on November 8, 2011.

This non-voting stance also surfaced in the media artifacts circulated by members of the Liberty Movement. I frequently encountered images and memes related to voting on Facebook and Tumblr. For example, this image of an unknown student was circulated widely on Facebook:



Fig. 8

Along with this picture of a student from Michigan State University:



Fig. 9

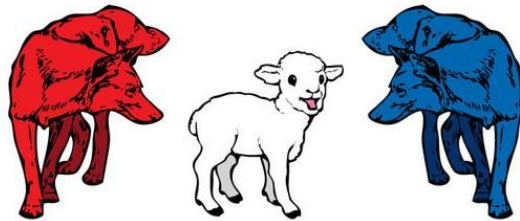
This meme of actor/comedian Drew Carey, who has been a vocal proponent of small government, also critiques voting:



Fig. 10

While this image questions whether voting even supports democracy:

DEMOCRACY



TWO WOLVES AND A SHEEP VOTING ON WHAT'S FOR DINNER

Fig. 11

Other images, while not directly critical of voting, made clear the negative repercussions of engaging in two-party politics. This image contains a self-explanatory statement on the outcome of voting for Governor Romney or President Obama:

YOU'RE FUCKED

Fig. 12

While this image simultaneously serves as a plea for viewers not to vote for Obama or Romney and as a critique of the use of drones in foreign wars:

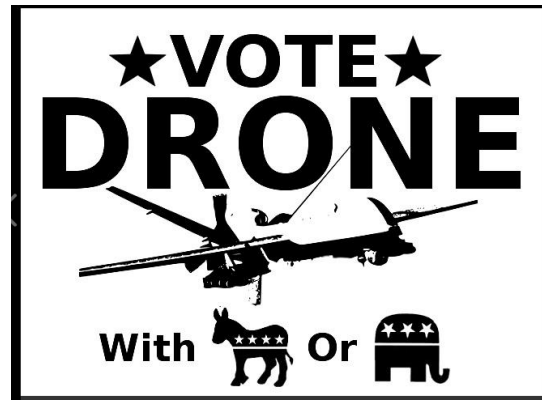


Fig. 13

Such images illustrate how the non-voting stance has become encoded into the movement's iconography.

Interestingly, while many participants felt disillusioned with electoral politics, they often described being supportive of others who might want to get involved in campaigns.

Aaron, 21, from Ohio, explained:

I mean, I'm not going to vote for Ron Paul. I'm not going to vote period. But I don't discourage people from, like, getting involved with it or anything like that. I'll discourage them from voting, but not from actually campaigning and activism; I think that's really valuable.¹²⁰

Notice how Aaron distinguishes voting from other kinds of activism, even campaigning. This stance may seem counterintuitive. However, campaigning (of the sort done by Ron Paul, who knew he wouldn't "win" the primary election) may be regarded as another form of education and thus congruent with Zuckerman's shifting notion of civics. Young

¹²⁰ Interview with Aaron on January 24, 2012.

libertarians *are highly politically knowledgeable, informed, and interested, but they often focus their energies elsewhere from the ballot box.*¹²¹

In their detailed account of generational shifts in citizen participation, Zukin et al. (2006) note a generation gap in voter turnout over the past 30-plus years (though youth voting did see an increase in the 2004, 2008 and 2012 elections), a trend that the libertarian disregard for voting seems to support.¹²² But other scholars (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003) have also noted a decline in other types of activities related to public life such as “working for parties and candidates, choosing public service careers, and following public affairs in the news.”¹²³

Young libertarians are different in that they are quite active in the more “civic” activities described above, but they are not as interested in electoral politics—that is, they don’t support Putnam’s (2000) claim that there has been an overall erosion in public life. Zukin et al. do find that Millennials tend to be more involved in civic activities like volunteering, but they don’t often view these activities as politically motivated.¹²⁴ In contrast, most of the young libertarians with whom I spoke characterized the goals of educating others about liberty and working towards wider acceptance of libertarian ideas as *highly* political, even though they operated outside the electoral sphere.

¹²¹ For a more in-depth explanation of this perspective, see: Liana Gamber Thompson, “Ron Paul and Gary Johnson Do Not Speak for All Young Libertarian Voters in America,” *PolicyMic*, October 23, 2012. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/17433/ron-paul-and-gary-johnson-do-not-speak-for-all-young-libertarian-voters-in-america>.

¹²² Cliff Zukin et al., *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

¹²³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) and Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003) in Zukin et al., *New Engagement*, 10.

¹²⁴ Zukin et al., *New Engagement*, 195.

Big L vs. little l and Political Participation

As described earlier, this investment in education over electoral politics can best be described as “little l” libertarianism. This viewpoint differs from, and is often in opposition to, what is termed “Big L” Libertarianism within the Liberty Movement. When people describes themselves as “Big L” Libertarians, they are most often signifying their membership in the Libertarian Party (LP), which seeks to expand political discourse by working toward a viable three party electoral system.

Students for Liberty describes itself as an organization with “little l” priorities. The SFL website highlights this focus on ideas over electoral politics:

Where other organizations seek to change policy and have students complete voter registration forms, SFL is focused on the *ideas* behind public policy, the philosophy of liberty, and seeks to spread the message of liberty above all else.¹²⁵

Alexander McCobin did not mince words when asked about the value of voting:

I don't think there's going to be any actual reform in the political system in short term. I don't invest my time in the political game because I believe nothing is going to happen there right now. The system is too ingrained for any meaningful change to take place. The older generations have caused the problems we're facing right now, and give little reason to expect their capability of offering an alternative.

What's most important in my mind is to change the general viewpoint of society, which means spreading the philosophy of liberty to more people. I think in 10 and 20 years from now, we're going to be in a very different situation where there are more people who openly endorse libertarianism, who are strong advocates in various positions in the society for these ideas, and who can actually change things. That's what I'm looking toward. Until we have an influential mass though, the only proposals offered will be short-term or marginal at best. Until more people actually embrace the ideas of liberty, spending time on the political system directly is not useful.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ “Students for Liberty FAQ” accessed July 3, 2012, <http://studentsforliberty.org/faq/>.

¹²⁶ Interview with Alexander McCobin on November 12, 2011.

McCobin describes his frustration with older generations, implicating them in the decline of party politics (he doesn't specify his primary source of discomfort, though common libertarian critiques often revolved around the extent of lobbying in Washington, D.C., corporate-government collusion, and incentivization of the two party system). Rather than taking up the task of fixing an impossibly corrupt system, McCobin and many of his comrades are betting on an impending shift in public consciousness.

This idea, at least in part, stems from [F.A. Hayek's](#) 1949 essay, "The Intellectuals and Socialism."¹²⁷ Many libertarians are not only devoted to a variety of political and philosophical schools of thought, but are often very well read in theory. In "The Intellectuals and Socialism," Hayek describes the "intellectual" class, or as he calls them, the "professional secondhand dealers in ideas."¹²⁸ Hayek argues that the success of socialism had much to do with the influence on public opinion by intellectuals (he uses the term in a broad sense to describe a number of "learned" professions) and that those invested in a resurgence of liberalism have much to learn from this model:

The main lesson which the true liberal must learn from the success of the socialists is that it was their courage to be Utopian which gained them the support of the intellectuals and therefore an influence on public opinion which is daily making possible what only recently seemed utterly remote.¹²⁹

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Hayek encourages his readers to "make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the

¹²⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Hayek.

¹²⁸ Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," in George B. de Huszar ed., 371. From Hayek, F.A., "The Intellectuals and Socialism," *The University of Chicago Law Review* (Spring 1949). Available at: <http://mises.org/document/1019>.

¹²⁹ Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," 384.

¹³⁰ Note that Hayek is referring to classical liberalism here when he talks about the "true liberal." Classical liberalism, brought back into favor in the 20th century by Hayek and Milton Friedman, is a 19th century political ideology that focuses largely on individual liberties and economic freedom. For more on classical liberalism, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_liberalism.

ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds.”¹³¹ It is this call to action that McCobin (who is a PhD student in Philosophy at Georgetown) and others at Students for Liberty have taken to heart, choosing to become 21st century “secondhand dealers in ideas,” whether at think tanks and policy organizations like the Institute for Humane Studies or the Cato Institute, The Atlas Foundation or the Foundation for Economic Education, or as aspiring professors, lawyers, and scholars.

A Conscious Choice

In the interviews, I found that libertarians with a wide range of philosophical outlooks had made the conscious choice not to vote. For instance, McCobin considers himself a Randian, or at least got interested in libertarianism through Ayn Rand, while Ann, quoted above, came from a neo-conservative background, but they both oppose voting as a useful strategy for change. T.J., a left libertarian, was also dubious about voting, even though he had volunteered for the Ron Paul campaign earlier in the year. While many participants draw their opinion of electoral politics from Hayek, [Public Choice Theory](#), a modern economic school of thought used to explain topics traditionally studied by political scientists, also holds that:

Libertarians with a wide range of philosophical outlooks had made the conscious choice not to vote.

Each voter is faced with a tiny probability that his vote will change the result of the elections, while gathering the relevant information necessary for a well-informed voting decision requires substantial time and effort. Therefore, the rational decision for each voter is to be generally ignorant of politics and perhaps even abstain from voting.^{132 133}

¹³¹ Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” 384.

¹³² “Public Choice Theory,” accessed August 8, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_choice_theory.

While the majority of participants described their disenchantment with the electoral system, not all participants felt abstaining from voting completely to be the best solution. In a July 2012 'HuffPo Live' video conversation on opting out of voting, Zak explains:

We can look at a vote as a signaling mechanism. That signaling mechanism says either you have faith in the system or you don't have faith in the system. By not voting, you show that you don't have faith in the system at all. By voting for a third party, you at least show that you're fed up with the current system.¹³⁴

Herman, a 28-year-old from Texas, and among the oldest participants, remained lukewarm on the idea of voting but emphasized its practicality nonetheless:

It [voting] is, in my opinion, kind of an act of self-defense. I don't think libertarianism requires you to be martyr. Some people think that if you're going to really believe in being a Libertarian, you've got to not pay your income taxes, you've got to not register your, but you've got to live in this world, and there are pragmatic things because, look, you have one life to live.¹³⁵

While these may not be emphatic endorsements for voting, these interviewees were among the more enthusiastic about the practice.

On the other hand, I talked to *no one* who felt that voting was a moral or civic duty. This finding directly supports Lance Bennett's claim that, in the digital age, conceptions of citizenship are changing rapidly.¹³⁶ Bennett argues that citizenship styles are moving from a *dutiful citizen* model, characterized by a sense of obligation to participate in government-centered activities and a belief in voting as the core democratic act, to an *actualizing citizen*

¹³³ This theory also touches on the cost/benefit analysis Brynn eluded to earlier in her discussion of why she doesn't vote. This view holds that voting takes too much "time and effort" for a return that is simply too small.

¹³⁴ "Opting out of Voting," accessed August 8, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/09/latest-conversations-opti_n_1659981.html.

¹³⁵ Interview with Herman on January 6, 2012.

¹³⁶ Lance W. Bennett, "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age." Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth. Edited by W. Lance Bennett. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 1-24. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262524827.001

model, where government obligation is replaced by a higher sense of individual purpose, and voting is less meaningful than practices like consumerism, volunteering, and transnational activism.¹³⁷ The actualizing citizen is also less apt to express her or his interests through political parties, and is distrustful of mass media. Instead, actualizing citizens favor loose networks like those fostered by digital and online technologies.¹³⁸

A Ron Paul Revolution?

While many of the interviewees were generally turned off by voting and party politics, I did interview some participants who were quite enthusiastic about the Ron Paul campaign. Paul ran as a Republican in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections and holds many libertarian-leaning beliefs such as a staunch anti-war stance. He was also the Libertarian Party presidential nominee in 1988.¹³⁹ Paul has gained considerable support from young people, particularly during the 2012 election cycle. Even some “little l” libertarians expressed their enthusiasm for his campaign, explaining that he has done a good job of spreading libertarian ideas to the public. Edie, a 20-year-old woman from Pennsylvania explained:

I do see a place for the politics maybe at this time, maybe at this stage of the game because obviously, a lot of people – like, look at for instance the Ron Paul elections. I think that’s a great way for the ideas to get out, though he may not win the election. I mean, it’d be great if he did. But he may not--he probably won’t. But even if he loses, that’s a huge steppingstone for people to become familiar with the ideas and introduce them to the ideas of libertarianism.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Bennett, “Changing Citizenship,” 14.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Gary Johnson, former governor of New Mexico, is the 2012 Libertarian Party presidential nominee. A few of the interviewees expressed support for Johnson, but having earned the nomination in May 2012, after most of the interviews had already been conducted, his name didn’t come up a lot.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Edie on January 30, 2012.

Even though Edie was supportive of Paul, her explanation implies a public education model, with voting and campaigning as a means of changing public opinion—views consistent with SFL’s larger mission.

Other interviewees explained that they did not plan to vote for Paul in the primary elections because they knew he had no chance of winning. This was a common sentiment, with the “power in numbers” argument almost entirely absent from the interviews.

Benjamin, 22, said:

I am a non-voter more or less. I would vote for someone that I really thought had a good shot and that was doing something very meaningful, but I just don’t see any of the frontrunners as that. You know this selection, I don’t think Ron Paul will win or get the nomination. I hope I don’t come across as eye-rolling at Ron Paul.¹⁴¹

Despite their thoughts on whether he had a chance at winning, or even at effecting change, participants generally held positive views toward Paul. The same, however, cannot be said for the Libertarian Party (something which came as quite the surprise to me). The majority of participants described themselves as either a) not knowing much about the LP and having never voted for an LP candidate or b) holding a generally neutral view of the party. A few said they had a negative view of the Libertarian Party, while others said they were glad the LP existed or that the cause of creating a viable third party was a noble one, but that it was largely ineffectual. Aaron, a 21-year-old from Ohio explained:

I kind of see the LP as a less effective Ron Paul where Paul has been in the Republican Party and he’s been able to get this national platform. But I still admire the Libertarian Party in the past presidents that they’ve run. As far as their effectiveness, I think they could be much more effective on a local and state level rather than running national politicians.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Benjamin on March 12, 2012.

Aaron, like many other interviewees, contends that the Libertarian Party will likely never have success on a national scale and would be better served to focus on local and state issues. This point of view is also representative of longstanding debates over Federalism; the term Federalism has more or less become synonymous with a push for increased state's rights, with many libertarians, Republicans, and Tea Partiers favoring increased state and local control. Within the Liberty Movement, some consider themselves to be more civil libertarians (interested more in *individual* liberty and protecting it from government—state and federal—intrusion of all types), while others consider themselves proponents of federalist libertarianism. Federalist libertarians seek to maximize individuals' rights to make decisions through local and state government structures and are somewhat less concerned when those decisions result in decreased individual liberty. Of course, these two camps are far from discreet, and most libertarians I talked to adhered to elements of both.

While many participants were utterly disenchanted with electoral politics, even sometimes questioning the efficacy of libertarian stars like Ron Paul, interviewees always remained infectiously enthusiastic about the political, economic, and philosophical theory that informed their beliefs.

I Heart Hayek: Libertarian Theory Fandom

"I wear that shirt just like I wear my Bob Marley T-shirt," said T.J., referring to the t-shirt he had just rummaged out of the dresser in his bedroom. After our conversation had turned to the topic of young libertarians' interest in (mostly long-dead) political and economic theorists, he had briefly paused our Skype interview to retrieve the shirt with

Austrian economic theorist, Friedrich Hayek's, image emblazoned on it in a style more than vaguely reminiscent of [Shepard Fairey's](#) work.¹⁴² T.J. proudly waved the shirt in front of his laptop camera, asking, "Can you see what it says?"

I replied, "Prepare to get schooled in my Austrian Perspective," and we both laughed.¹⁴³



Fig. 14

I recognized the turn of phrase from "Fear the Boom and Bust," the first in a series of "Keynes vs. Hayek Rap Anthems" by writer/producer John Papola, whose videos, primarily accessible through YouTube, are part of an educational venture called [EconStories](#) funded by the [Mercatus Center](#) at George Mason University.¹⁴⁴ In Papola's rap battles, the legendary John Maynard Keynes and the scrappier Hayek dual for both lyrical and ideological supremacy:

¹⁴² See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shepard_Fairey.

¹⁴³ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

¹⁴⁴ See: <http://econstories.tv/> and <http://mercatus.org/>. As of June 2012, "Fear the Boom and Bust" had over 3.5 million hits on YouTube.



Fig. 15

T.J., 25, had purchased his t-shirt from the EconStories online store, but I also talked to young libertarians who sported homemade creations. Bruce, a 20-year-old from Tennessee said:

We [libertarians] are fanboys and fangirls. I am myself. I have a Rothbard shirt, a Hoppe t-shirt... a Hayek shirt. And I also write things on white T-shirts talking about economics and stuff like that, like I'll quote Rand or I'll quote Hayek. I bought my ex [girlfriend] little Rand earrings... and a bracelet too.¹⁴⁵

Other participants reported owning similar “merch,” ranging from “Hayek is my Homeboy” t-shirts, to “I Heart Hayek” bumper stickers and water bottles. I was somewhat perplexed by all the talk of Hayek and others at first; going into this case study with an outsider’s

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Bruce on March 29, 2012.

perspective on libertarianism, the only figure I assumed to play the role of such an icon in the movement was Ayn Rand. As Bruce points out, Rand is still a key figure for young libertarians, especially those who are just becoming interested in the movement, but a host of other theorists are equally if not more revered by this generation of libertarians. T.J. explained:

I see a lot of times in the media, people think, "Oh, Ayn Rand, libertarian." Yeah, that's like the front porch of libertarianism. Like, "Come into the house. Come upstairs." There are so many more other influences and thoughts in the libertarian movement.

He continued:

The fact that there are libertarians who are starting to buzz about Malcolm X is different. It's going to produce a different kind of libertarian movement because as much as we love Ayn Rand, she's not our saint.¹⁴⁶

Mention of Malcolm X also surprised me, but T.J., a self-described "left libertarian," explained that, these days, many young libertarians are taking inspiration from a wider variety of theorists, even more conventionally progressive ones, as they become increasingly committed to social justice issues like gay marriage and immigrant rights.¹⁴⁷

In a follow up conversation, T.J., explained that Malcolm X's 1964 "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech included a passage that summed up one anti-state perspective that he and many of his libertarian peers found inspirational. In this speech at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, Malcolm X said:

This government has failed us. The government itself has failed us. The white liberals, who have been posing as our friends, have failed us. Once we see that all these other sources to which we've turned have failed, we stop turning to them and turn to ourselves. We need a self-help program, a do it

¹⁴⁶ Interview with T.J. on January 20, 2012.

¹⁴⁷ On the issue of immigrant rights, libertarians are quite aligned with progressives. When I mentioned our group had done previous work on DREAM activists (see 32), some of the interviewees described being very supportive of the DREAMers and their cause.

yourself philosophy, a do it right now philosophy, an it's already too late philosophy. This is what you and I need to get with... Black Nationalism is a self-help philosophy... this is a philosophy that eliminates the necessity for division and argument.

T.J.'s adoption of this part of Malcolm X's speech shows an effort to extrapolate the idea of a "self-help" program out of the context of black liberation and map it onto broader ideological concerns about citizenship and democracy. In this case, the "self-help" comes in the form of adherence to radical anti-state, pro-liberty philosophies that, from young libertarians' point of view, will benefit people from all ethnicities, backgrounds, and nations. T.J.'s mention of this segment of Malcom X's speech also speaks to a growing body of scholarship on "DIY Citizenship," in which authors and activists like Megan Boler argue that the "social web," or Web 2.0, allows participants to move toward a "radical democratization of knowledge."¹⁴⁸ DIY Citizenship holds that the use of web-based media and engagement in practices like citizen journalism can have a direct impact in shaping political and social movements. For T.J. and his colleagues, the project of changing people's mindsets is just as important as the tools that help them do so.

On Facebook, young SFL members make and share tributes to their ideological inspirations. Below is a screen shot from the Libertarian High Schoolers Facebook group depicting Lysander Spooner, abolitionist and anarchist political philosopher:

¹⁴⁸ Megan Boler, ed., *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).



Fig. 16

The image, which reads, “V is for Voluntary,” refers to the anarcho-capitalist philosophy of voluntaryism (described earlier) of which Spooner was an early proponent.¹⁴⁹ The post includes an anti-statist quote by Spooner: “A man is none the less a slave because he is allowed to choose a new master once in a term of years.”

After following such Facebook pages, talking to dozens of interviewees and conference participants, reading blogs, and subscribing to libertarian YouTube channels and twitter feeds, it has become increasingly clear that young libertarians can be seen as more than “nerds” with penchant for reading dense economic and political theory; they are, put simply, devoted fans of thinkers and theorists.

Alan McKee characterizes cultural theory fans (of Foucault, Butler, Zizek, and others) as reaping intellectual as well as emotional benefit from theory:

Theory fans have a passion for Theory that goes beyond a passive acceptance of whatever they are given by publishers and conference organizers. They actively seek out more work by their favorite authors and build strong emotional relationships with it. While some consumers read Theory for

¹⁴⁹ See my brief earlier discussion of Voluntarism in the Conceptions of Engagement section: 106

purely utilitarian, work-related purposes (for example, to complete a Ph.D., prepare a lecture, or write an article that will be useful on their c.v.), Theory fans will also read it for pleasure.¹⁵⁰

I would describe libertarian theory fans as similarly taking great pleasure in mastering (often dense) theory and relishing the process of self-learning. But I also want to highlight both the participatory and playful natures of libertarian fandom. For example, at any given SFL event, it is common to run into groups of young Rothbardians, all wearing bowties (Rothbard himself was known for wearing a bowtie) to signify their allegiance.

Despite the complex, and even intimidating, nature of the vast canon informing contemporary libertarian thought (examples include Objectivism, Agorism, Anarcho-capitalism, and the list goes on), some young libertarians seek to make it understandable, current, and entertaining. Witness Dorian Electra's love song to Austrian Economic theorist Friedrich Hayek, which inspired the unfavorable Gawker article mentioned at the outset:

¹⁵⁰ Allen McKee, "The Fans of Cultural Theory," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 89.



Fig. 17

In my interview with Electra, she described her desire to make the theory entertaining and accessible:

I want to appeal to people, and even if they disagree, don't understand, or don't care what I'm saying, they will get something out of the video. Because I have this twofold goal with -- it's really ambitious, but here, I'm going to try to articulate it. One is to have academic ideas, present it in a more entertaining and accessible format. Accessibility is like what I'm all about, because -- I don't know. It's like grandma can understand you, like -- I haven't really reached that, but I'm trying. It's not easy.¹⁵¹

During our conversation, Electra divulged having a soft spot for saccharine pop music and described the revelatory moment in which she decided to pair dense theory with the appeal and fun of pop music:

¹⁵¹ Interview with Dorian Electra on March 8, 2012.

The other part of the goal is having -- I really like pop music. I used to love music and I was too, indeed, cool for that, but I'm like, "No. I love Katy Perry. I like Nicki Minaj and all of those." It's so cool. And so, with our other goals to have pop music actually infused with something that's like a little more substance and just like sex and party and whatever, which is fine, but let's spice that up too, make it more interesting on both aspects because I think that gets more people into the dialogue.¹⁵²

***"I want to appeal to people, and even if they disagree, don't understand, or don't care what I'm saying, they will get something out of the video."
-Dorian Electra***

Electra's stated goals highlight an increasingly close relationship between politics and entertainment in the 21st century. Van Zoonen (2005) argues that modernist political discourses often construct popular culture and

politics as two distinct spheres but explains that, in fact, fan communities and political constituencies maintain a number of similar characteristics with regard to strategies of performance and community-building.¹⁵³

Academic and popular discourses often hold that fandom is primarily an affective enterprise, while political activities are more rooted in critical cognitive assessments that constitute good citizenship (informed knowledge of current events, etc.).¹⁵⁴ Both Van Zoonen and Jenkins argue against such a dichotomy, offering a range of case studies where fan practices bridge with political and civic activities, in ways which combine rational discourse with more affective expressions.¹⁵⁵ Electra's work illustrates that fandom and citizenship are far from opposites. Rather, fan practices can actually lead to informed citizenship. Electra offers her fans a simultaneous experience of entertainment and

¹⁵² Interview with Dorian Electra on March 8, 2012.

¹⁵³ Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*, 2005 (New York: Rowman and Littlefield), 53-68.

¹⁵⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 1992 (New York: Routledge) in Van Zoonen, *Entertaining*, 61. See also: Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 2013 (New York: NYU Press).

¹⁵⁵ See particularly: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. (London: Routledge, 2002).

economics education in her more recent work. “We Got it 4 Cheap” offers viewers a lesson on supply and demand:

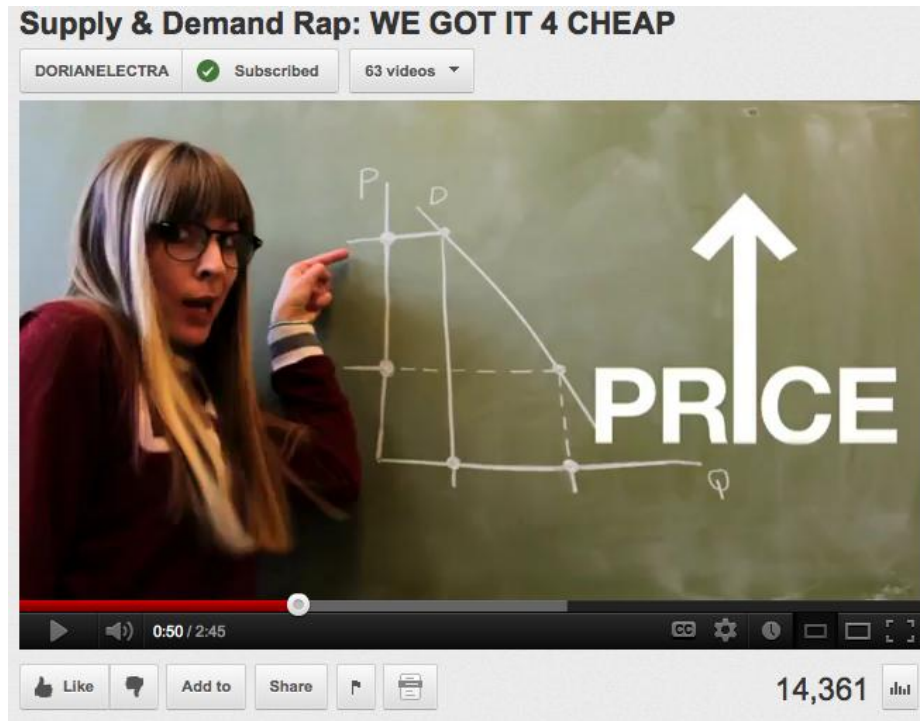


Fig. 18

While Electra’s latest video, “Fa\$t Ca\$h,” situated even more solidly in the vein of libertarian education videos a la John Papola, provides a catchy breakdown of the Federal Reserve and artificially low interest rates:



Fig. 19

Libertarian Fandom as Political

The creative productions of young artists/theory fans like Dorian Electra have helped bridge the gap between fandom and politics for a new generation of libertarians.¹⁵⁶ Today's young libertarians have access to a large (and growing) selection of libertarian online communities, social spaces and platforms like YouTube, which have been key in defining the contours of the modern Liberty Movement and shaping the tastes of its participants (characterized consistently by interviewees as a far cry from libertarians of yore, whom a participant described as “neckbeards” and “computer programmers living in

¹⁵⁶ See also popular libertarian vloggers, [PraxGirl](http://www.youtube.com/user/praxgirl) (<http://www.youtube.com/user/praxgirl>) and [Token Libertarian Girl](http://www.youtube.com/user/tokenlibertariangirl) (<http://www.youtube.com/user/tokenlibertariangirl>).

their mom's basement").¹⁵⁷ The libertarian fandom described here is highly participatory in nature, and the importance of young people's digital media practices in contributing to that ethos cannot be highlighted enough.

Informing this work is the notion that cultural engagement (fandom or otherwise) should be understood as a legitimate form of political expression. Brough and Shresthova (2012) explain this point of view:

Over the last several decades, younger generations in particular have become civically and politically engaged in new and different ways, related less to electoral politics or government or civic organizations and more to personal interests, social networks, and cultural or commodity activism (a form of protest that is typically levied against private companies rather than governments). These modes of political participation are often enacted through informal, noninstitutionalized, nonhierarchical networks in and around the Internet (Bennett 2008; Ito et al. 2009; Jenkins et al. 2006; Kahne, Feezell, and Lee 2011). They are political insofar as they aim to influence or change existing power relations.¹⁵⁸

Moreover, engagement with and through corporate and privatized structures has become an increasingly common practice with regard to politics and activism, particularly for fans. Jenkins (2012) writes:

In the digital world, the forums for expressing political concerns, and the policies and infrastructures shaping our capacities to do so, are controlled by private interests. Our political struggles often take place through languages and contexts heavily shaped by commercial culture, making fan and consumer activism central to contemporary social movements.¹⁵⁹

Jenkins' assertions regarding the importance of fan activism undergird many of this report's findings and help to explain why this case study was undertaken—we think young

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Seth on February 2, 2012.

¹⁵⁸ Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, "Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

¹⁵⁹ Henry Jenkins, "Cultural Accupuncture": Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

libertarians are an exciting and interesting group when it comes to politics, digital media, and fandom.

Conclusion

And this leads us back to the Gawker critique of Dorian Electra. By looking at Dorian's work within the broader context of libertarian fandom and activism, it becomes clear that what young libertarian media producers are actually doing is creating an alternative means of engaging politics, participating in what Cohen and Kahne would call participatory politics. When contextualized by the finding that so many young libertarians are disillusioned with electoral politics, theory fandom can be seen as an arena for meaningful participation and a stepping stone to a new brand of 21st century civic engagement, whether that's the actualizing citizenship described by Bennett or the new digital civics described by Zuckerman. Instead of writing off Electra's work as an attempt by the conservative forces to manipulate young people, as Tkacik does in her article, these videos should be seen as evidence of an important shift in young people's conceptions of social change.

And it's not just the media makers like Electra, producing and performing videos and creating other media artifacts, who are carving out alternative mechanisms for participation; it's also the young libertarians who are spreading them, discussing and framing them for others; it's the interviewee who wears his homemade Hoppe t-shirt to work, or the young woman who totes her I Heart Hayek water bottle around campus. These acts are meaningful, not only in so far as they call attention to the movement and its ideas, but because they can constitute a discursive context where others might ask them about

those ideas, opening up opportunities for communication and learning. When I attended the International Students for Liberty Conference (ISFLC) earlier this year, I saw a number of male attendees with this symbol tattooed prominently on their forearms:



Fig. 20

I finally asked someone what it meant and was told that the symbol is called “ama-gi,” a Sumerian word for “freedom.” The cuneiform rendering above is thought by some libertarians to be the first written expression of the concept of liberty, and it has been trademarked as the [Liberty Fund](#) logo.¹⁶⁰ This interaction at the conference presented an opportunity for me to learn more about history and the Liberty Movement, and I am willing to bet those who are bold enough to have the symbol tattooed in highly visible areas of their body are hoping to ignite similar discussions with others.

In her working paper on the non-profit social justice organization [Invisible Children](#)¹⁶¹ whose *Kony 2012* film became the most “viral” video ever, Lana Swartz describes how the organization has been particularly successful at producing and selling “merch” (t-shirts, bracelets, bags, etc.) that functions as “extractable extensions of the [Invisible Children] story.”¹⁶² These often-controversial items serve to spark conversation and act as a part of a larger transmedia strategy rather than isolated instances of consumer

¹⁶⁰ See: <http://www.libertyfund.org/>.

¹⁶¹ See: <http://invisiblechildren.com/>.

¹⁶² Swartz, Lana. 2011. “Invisible Children: Transmedia, Storytelling, Mobilization” working paper.

activism. Interviewees described using libertarian-oriented apparel in much the same way, hoping to open up room for questions, conversation and debate in public spaces.

Some of the interviewee's assertions about hoping people get *less* politically involved are rather troubling, and the same could be said for young libertarians' disavowal of the political system more generally. Yet a major takeaway from this case study is that young libertarians are, in so many ways, exemplars when it comes to their commitment to democracy, political knowledge, and furthering civic goals. While many young libertarians described their disillusionment (and often disgust) with the electoral process, their sophisticated understanding of that process and its history was impressive.

These young libertarians and their complex relationship to the electoral process also push us, as scholars, to continue to refine working definitions of participatory

Young libertarians show that activism can come in many forms, and sometimes, that activism has nothing at all to do with electoral politics.

politics.¹⁶³ At the very least, they complicate current understandings of the relationship between participatory politics and institutional politics and illustrate how stronger ties to elite institutions do not necessarily stymie participatory engagement, but sometimes even allow it to

flourish. Young libertarians show that activism can come in many forms, and sometimes, that activism has nothing at all to do with electoral politics.

Ideological beliefs aside, libertarians are too often misunderstood or ignored by the news media, politicians, and academics. They are regularly painted as misguided or misinformed and are frequently ignored in major political debates. However, this case study illustrates that, to the contrary, young libertarians are often extremely

¹⁶³ This is particularly important for those of us affiliated with the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics as we continue to define the boundaries of this in-progress definition.

knowledgeable about local, national, and often international political issues and about both liberal and conservative party platforms.

The libertarians I interviewed were intelligent, articulate, and, most importantly, passionate about changing the status quo and working toward what they interpreted as a freer society. While many of them may have given up on voting, they have not given up on democracy. Benjamin, 22, explained:

In a way, I consider myself a radical for democracy because I think when people say democracy, they don't just mean like the majority putting a ballot in a box. They mean things like free speech and access to good opportunities and education and individual rights and the right not to be imprisoned and things like that. I don't think it's just simply, like, majoritarian elections. And so, in that way, I want to live in a world with a very meaningful, deep democracy.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps Benjamin is right when he says that meaningful democracy is about so much more than going to the polls; it's about trying to make the world a more just place. This report shows that, whether or not the libertarian way of achieving that world makes sense to those on the outside, young libertarians have the conviction and commitment, as well as the skills and practices to make a significant political impact, building a new generation of radicals for democracy along the way.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Benjamin on March 12, 2012.

Appendix: Methodological Notes

1. *Participant Ages and Interview Methods* (see p. 4):

- a. While I interviewed one 28-year-old and one 26-year-old, the other participants were 23 or younger.
- b. Because participants came from various regions of the U.S. (and 1 from Europe), most of the interviews were conducted via Skype or phone.

2. *Post-interview Survey Data on Gender and Race* (see p. 8):

While we did not conduct extensive quantitative research with regard to the participants' gender and ethnicity, respondents did report their gender and the race/ethnicity with which they identified on a MAPP survey; all but 3 of the interview participants took the survey. 27 total respondents completed the survey, though many failed to answer every question on the survey (the survey did not force answers on any of the questions except for the one regarding age). Of the respondents who completed the survey question on gender, 17 identified as male, 7 identified as female, while 1 chose not to answer, for a total of 25 responses. Of the respondents who chose to answer the survey question regarding race/ethnicity, 18 identified as white.

3. *Sampling for High Schoolers* (see p. 18):

While recruiting for interview participants, I had a very hard time finding participants under 18. While I had no shortage of potential interviewees college-age and up willing to participate, I had to exhaust all connections to assemble a group of 5 students under 18. Of those 5, none were young women.

In the midst of trying to find libertarian high schoolers to interview, I received an email from Jake, a high school senior I had interviewed a few weeks prior, notifying me that he'd created a Facebook page called Libertarian High Schoolers. He explained that he had started the page because he saw a need to connect high school libertarians to each other and with libertarian organizations like the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) and the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). Jake generously offered to help me recruit high school-aged participants on Libertarian High Schoolers, a process which sped up the sampling process quite a bit.

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