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The Great American Disconnect

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Fifteen years ago a Yale grad student named Jason Sorens began pondering what might seem like a wild question: How many libertarians would it take to commandeer a state government?

At the time Mr. Sorens, then a 24-year-old campus libertarian, felt failed by electoral politics. The Libertarian Party had earned a few million votes in the 2000 elections, but these were scattered throughout the country, and its candidates had never won a federal office. (They still haven't.) Maybe the solution was for libertarians to pack up and move—to converge on a sparsely populated state and take over.

This wasn't an entirely new idea. For decades libertarians had dreamed of creating a polity to call their own. "There had been some efforts to build sandbars in the Pacific, to anchor a concrete ship in the Caribbean, and they'd all failed miserably," says Mr. Sorens, who now lectures in political science at Dartmouth College. "I wanted something that could be done easily for most people—relatively easily, compared to moving into the middle of the Pacific."

He posted his proposal online in the summer of 2001, and the Free State Project was born. For the past decade it has centered on a pledge: Signers solemnly agreed that once the total number of pledges hit 20,000, they would move within five years to New Hampshire. As the pledge count ticked upward, some didn't want to wait, and nearly 2,000 early movers arrived. About a dozen and a half now sit in the state House of Representatives. Not everyone is pleased. "Free Staters," a Democratic legislator wrote a few years back, "are the single biggest threat the state is facing today."

One wonders what that official thought in February, when the 20,000th signer finally triggered the pledge. Although it has been nearly 15 years since the first promises to move were made, Free State organizers expect that another 6,000 libertarians, at least, will be on their way shortly. They're already dreaming of the statutes that a few thousand more activists, and a few dozen more legislators in Concord, might be able to undo: taxes and subsidies; occupational licensing; limits on concealed carry of firearms; laws against marijuana and prostitution. "I've always said my vision," the group's president, Carla Gericke, tells me, "is sort of like a Yankee Hong Kong, or a Yankee Switzerland."

Following your politics across the country might sound quixotic, but research suggests that many Republicans and Democrats have done more or less the same thing, however unwittingly. About a decade ago, the journalist Bill Bishop noticed that over time blue counties had become bluer, red counties redder. In the tight presidential election of 1976, he calculated, only about a quarter of counties went for either candidate by a margin of 20 points or more. In the equally tight 2004 race, nearly half of counties did.

Intuitively, it makes some sense that people, over time, sort themselves out. An evangelical is more likely to move to a community with an active church. A progressive will feel at home where he sees “fair trade” coffee advertised.

To take an example from my own experience: Anyone moving to Washington, D.C., who wants a bit of elbow room has a choice of suburbias: Maryland or Virginia. For me it was an easy decision. With Maryland’s taxes and gun laws, why even bother looking?

Not everyone accepts the sorting thesis, but a study last year by two Rand Corp. analysts suggested that up to a third of the increased polarization in the U.S. House of Representatives over the past 40 years came from “geographic clustering”—by affinity for marriage, in particular. A 2012 paper that tracked individual movers by applying statistical wizardry to voter-registration data came to the same conclusion: Republicans and Democrats tend toward communities hospitable to their views.

Given Kentucky’s political shift from apple-red to deep-Merlot, and California’s from sky-blue to dark-denim, it is understandable that the Free State Project might want to splash some libertarian gold on the map, no matter if the gains are incremental. “I’m desperate for even small victories for liberty,” Mr. Sorens says. “I’m happy to take moving the ball down field, even if it’s just 5 yards.”

He does think that New Hampshire, with his comrades’ help, has become “much freer” in the past five years. Lawmakers weakened teacher tenure and repealed the state’s certificate-of-need law, which required hospitals to get permission before building a new facility. They overrode the Democratic governor’s veto to pass a budget that by the end of the decade cuts the business-profits tax to 7.9% from 8.5%. They enacted an education tax credit, giving companies an 85% deduction for donations to private-school scholarships.

This kind of mundane grinding out of public policy rarely raises hackles. What has made the Free State Project notorious in certain circles, however, are the high jinks of a handful of die-hards, which read like parodies of libertarianism. Free Staters created the Church of the Sword, a fake nontheistic religion dedicated to fencing and pie-eating, and then appealed to the state Supreme Court seeking tax exemption for their “parsonage.” They proffered a local measure in Grafton (pop. 1,300) to decree the town a “United Nations Free Zone.”

One Free Stater, identified by the Nashua Telegraph newspaper only as “Liberty Carrots,” went to the airport with a bolt-action rifle to hand out anti-TSA literature. Another once tried to get through airport security carrying a copy of the Declaration of Independence, but no ID. He aired his grievances to the New Hampshire Union Leader: “Now you can’t even tell jokes in the airport and you have to be quieter. They’re slowly taking away our liberties.”

In 2012 a new jury-nullification law led to the acquittal of a Rastafarian, who—this feels relevant—happened to be white, on charges of growing marijuana. One of the jurors turned out to be a Free Stater.

A group of malcontents in Keene became known for “Robin Hooding”: feeding coins into expired parking meters to prevent the city from writing \$5 tickets, which the band of merry libertarians called “the king’s tariff.” But altruism curdled when the coin-toters started shadowing the town’s meter maids for hours, insulting and videotaping them. Aside from being

politically counterproductive, the effort was confusing: Aren't parking meters, which put a price on a scarce public resource, a libertarian solution?

Mr. Sorens, a soft-spoken, besuited academic who describes himself as a “deontological Kantian libertarian,” says that such tactics are misguided. But he insists that the headline-making Free Staters are a small minority, and that even these rabble rousers are growing up. “In Keene they've gotten a lot more mature over the last three years,” he says. “There haven't been any topless, open-carry litter pickups recently. Or people smoking pot in the police station.”

At the Free State Project's annual Liberty Forum in Manchester last month, which drew 600 people, a third from out of state, it's the same sort of contradictory mix. Half the schedule seems to be filled with presentations on monetarism or political theory from staid think-tankers affiliated with the Mercatus Center and the Cato Institute. The other half is aimed at the freethinkers.

A presentation on “Anarchy: Dressing for Success” is co-hosted by a gent wearing a Guy Fawkes beard, tails and a white top hat. The gist is that if you look respectable, nobody will know you're for marijuana legalization. It isn't exactly “get clean for Gene”—but “get class for grass” might do. There's a session on applying the nonaggression principle to parenting. “I think this is really where authoritarianism is brewed, is in the home,” one of the leaders says, which leaves me wondering whether Donald Trump was spanked as a child.

During a session for potential movers to New Hampshire, a fellow from Seattle with a full beard and a shaved head asks about transporting an extensive firearms collection across the country. That leads a slight, middle-age woman to tell how, during her own move, the suspension on her Penske truck blew out in Iowa under the weight of 18,000 rounds of ammunition.

At the expo, tables are set with wares like knitted hats and painted portraits of Ron Paul. The Women's Defense League is raffling off a 12-gauge shotgun. There's a bitcoin ATM, which zaps digital currency to users after they insert cash. Once I fill my electronic wallet, I buy a jar of jam for about two hundredths of a bitcoin, or \$8 at the current exchange rate.

The Free State Project's libertarianism isn't for the faint of heart: The belle of the ball at the Liberty Forum is Edward Snowden, who Skypes in to answer questions from an undisclosed location in Russia. The mother of Ross Ulbricht, who was sentenced to life in prison last year for running the darknet marketplace Silk Road, hosts a session to plead his case, which is on appeal.

One needn't be won over by all their views to wish Free Staters well. It isn't as if New Hampshire can offer Mr. Snowden asylum, and the odds seem slim that the state will repeal its vice laws and let citizens freely trade barbiturates for bitcoins. If, however, 8,000 activists have a shot at making New Hampshire a model of school choice and fiscal responsibility, that seems worth cheering. As Grant Bosse, the editorial-page editor of the Union Leader, tells me, “I think it's a good thing that more people are talking about limited government.”