



CoinDesk

Cody Wilson Speaks Out on Campaign to Dismantle Bitcoin Foundation

[Jon Southurst](#)

January 2, 2015

Anarchist activist Cody Wilson has officially launched his candidacy for the upcoming Bitcoin Foundation board elections, and reaffirmed his intention to try and disband the organization from within if successful.

Wilson [nominated](#) himself with a post on the foundation's forums on 20th December and has also launched [a website](#) to support his campaign.

A staunch opponent of bitcoin regulation or centralization, Wilson is also best known for co-founding [Defense Distributed](#), a donor-funded nonprofit organization that designs and distributes plans for the 3D-printed 'Liberator' pistol and '[Ghost Gunner](#)' CNC milling machine.

He was also part of the founding team of [DarkWallet](#), the project to make bitcoin transaction anonymization easy for everyday users.

"I will run on a platform of the complete dissolution of the Bitcoin Foundation and will begin and end every single one of my public statements with that message," Wilson [said in November](#) when he first announced his intention to run.

Notably, the Bitcoin Foundation's November [announcement](#) that it would wind down its education, outreach and public policy efforts to focus on developing bitcoin's software core appears not to have weakened his campaign.

Wilson's recently posted [manifesto](#) also does not hold back on its combative rhetoric and disdain for the foundation, with its introduction that states:

"This Bitcoin Foundation ... was always an embarrassing exercise in bad faith and state philosophy. It was always a vessel for frauds and second-rate minds to collude against the public. I invite you now to its ritual sacrifice."

Elections [will be held](#) 13-19th February for the individual board seats being vacated by outgoing executive director Jon Matonis and current chief scientist [Gavin Andresen](#).

Election committee chair Brian Goss posted an [acknowledgement](#) that nominations including Wilson's had been received. Official confirmations will be posted mid-January.

Structure is the problem

Speaking to CoinDesk, Wilson said his complaint is not with any individual or group within the foundation, but the structure of the organization itself.

The problem with the Bitcoin Foundation goes all the way back to its inception and original mission, Wilson said, adding:

"The best way to help your business is to be part of a trade group and lobby Congress for preferential or beneficial regulation."

Rather than forming a body to standardize and protect an open-source technology *a la* the [Linux Foundation](#), he said, the Bitcoin Foundation gave itself a wider role with lobbying power and creation of global policy strategies.

Incoming executive director Patrick Murck [promised a new era](#) of openness and consultation with the foundation's constituents, and conducted surveys into what members wanted most. This led to the promise to focus only on bitcoin's technology.

This refocus on development only, however, is superficial and there is no meaningful break with its current incarnation, Wilson believes. He notes that public statements have not changed the foundation's by-laws, its established channels of communication or its affiliate programs around the world.

Even if current leaders are sincere, those in the near or longer-term future could simply come in and pick up the threads previous lobbying efforts have left in place, he said.

Early actions

When bitcoin's price shot up around April 2013 and began to appear in mainstream headlines, often in association with operations like [Silk Road](#), regulators also started to take a much closer interest.

In response, advocacy groups, including the Bitcoin Foundation, hurried to reassure the authorities that the technology and most businesses were legitimate.

Had it not done so, some say, government moves to further marginalize or even block access to bitcoin may have ensued.

Wilson disagrees, and says the foundation's founders were also too fast to reveal bitcoin's potential and seek to negotiate it with regulators.

He said:

"It was the first self-annointed evangelists of bitcoin who were also the people that started this foundation. I just think it was such a critical kind of betrayal, because they gave the security state all the briefings on the technology, where we could've [had] one, maybe two, more years of freedom to experiment."

'Serious' campaign

Despite the rhetoric, the candidacy is not meant to be flippant or overly negative, Wilson said, and he intends to "give other candidates a run for their money".

"Like in most of my endeavors, I don't know enough to know if it's impossible."

He has been conversing with other former members of the foundation who have become disillusioned with the its recent direction, he said. This could potentially bring a contingent of energized participants to the election who wouldn't have been involved otherwise.

Wilson expects outside criticism of his campaign, or even challenges to his legitimacy via the foundation's own bylaws, should he be elected.

However, it is a serious campaign, he stresses, saying it is legally possible while abiding by all the current rules. He would take his seat and does not wish other members to simply turn him away at the first board meeting.

Bitcoin without a foundation

But can bitcoin still succeed without a public face to argue for its legitimacy?

That depends on your definition of success, Wilson said, adding that in terms of acceptance and use, bitcoin's superiority over existing financial technology would see it make gains without formal help.

He said:

"Most of the critical innovations in finance so far have just happened ... e-mail didn't need a foundation, it just took over the Internet like a wildfire, it was so superior to mailing a letter."

Wilson would like to start a debate about what 'bitcoin's success' actually means to different people, he said. He does not view success as bitcoin merely becoming an "under the hood lubricant for other financial transactions", unseen by users.

Instead, it represents a kind of singularity that entails whole new political ways of being, new economic modes, rebellion.

Making "Faustian bargains" with regulatory powers would ultimately limit what can be achieved with bitcoin politically, even if the software remained capable of fulfilling Satoshi Nakamoto's original vision.

Jim Harper's alternate view

Jim Harper was the Bitcoin Foundation's [Global Policy Counsel](#) from March to December 2014, and is a senior fellow at libertarian think-tank the [Cato Institute](#). Disagreeing with the foundation's decision to withdraw from public policy and education, he left his job there and is now also running for a board position.

He posted on the Bitcoin Foundation forums that he [did not agree](#) with Wilson's approach, and suggested it was more about provocation and drawing attention to the cause than for the good of bitcoin – but also that such discussion "shouldn't be off the table".

Harper told CoinDesk that the foundation instead needs stability before it can again be a credible public policy voice or educational resource. While he has his own vision for the foundation's return to a policy role, it would require a consensus of the board.

"Let's make sure there's a solid organization that has fundraising in place to support all its work, then we might regrow the organization into roles that many of us joined expecting the Foundation to do."

Bitcoin can certainly exist without a foundation, Harper added, but a well-run foundation can help speed its adoption worldwide.

"Education and public policy work can increase direct adoption and position conventional financial services companies to help deliver bitcoin's benefits to billions of people."

Growing the bitcoin ecosystem this way would do nothing to prevent bitcoin from developing independently at the same time, he said. There need not be a conflict between those parts of the bitcoin community interacting with regulators, and others developing the ecosystem independent of government regulatory systems.

Innovation is more uncomfortable

Wilson compared bitcoin pioneers to those of the 1990s' '[cryptography wars](#)' who went to court and risked jail terms for creating technology like [remailers](#) and data encryption software PGP, as well as his own work with Defense Distributed.

He said:

"Yes, it's more uncomfortable. You don't make as much money. If you want to start a bitcoin business you might run afoul of the SEC. But making these direct overtures to [regulators], without even being solicited, that seems to me to be a betrayal of the goodwill and political capital of early bitcoin."

Wilson acknowledges that there is considerable anger and outrage in the words he's written in his campaign manifesto, but insists it is not his intent to be punitive.

I don't believe it's purely about punishing the foundation for what it's done; it's about recognizing it and hopefully inviting whatever libertarian or anarchist segment of bitcoin is left and activating it."

CoinDesk spoke to the Bitcoin Foundation, but its leadership declined to comment other than saying anyone had a right to campaign on the platform of their choice and that the organization did not want to interfere in the electoral process.