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Why are Libertarians Mostly Dudes?

Jeet Heer

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Since 1980, the Republican Party has been bedeviled by a persistent gender gap in presidential elections, as GOP nominees have struggled with female voters. But Rand Paul is facing an intensification of this phenomenon: He can't even win over Republican women. A [new CNN poll](#) shows that the Kentucky senator is highly competitive among male primary voters, his 13 percent support putting him neck-and-neck with top candidates like Scott Walker (13 percent), Marco Rubio (12 percent) and Jeb Bush (11 percent). Yet among Republican women, Paul's share of the likely vote collapses to 2 percent. The small sample size of the poll might have exaggerated the margin of error, but the size of the gender gap Paul faces is far larger than that of any other politician in the poll.

Why is Paul so unpopular among women? Setting aside what women think about Paul's personal qualities, which would require pure speculation, consider what sets him apart from all the other candidates vying for the GOP nomination: his highly distinct political philosophy. While not a doctrinaire libertarian, Paul is by far the most libertarian-leaning candidate in the race. And there's plenty of evidence that the libertarian worldview leaves most women cold, despite the fact that female intellectuals—Ayn Rand, most famously—have been pivotal in creating libertarianism.

The demographic profile of libertarians is sharply defined. According to 2013 Pew survey, 7 percent of Americans identify as libertarian. Of those, two-thirds are men (68 percent) and nearly all are non-Hispanic whites (94 percent). That is, the typical libertarian is a white man. These firm demographic contours cry out for an explanation since, at first glance, there doesn't seem much intrinsically white or male about libertarianism. Proclaiming itself a philosophy of

individualism, with no overt celebrations of either patriarchy or racism, libertarianism still ends up being monochromatic and male.

Cathy Young, a libertarian journalist and author of the 1999 book *Ceasefire!: Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality*, notes that “if you look at polls that actually ask people about the role of government, the people at the far end of the libertarian scale are definitely more likely to be male, maybe by a 2:1 margin. Why? I think that for a variety of reasons (whether innately psychological, culturally driven, or shaped by life experience), women are less likely to be drawn to political philosophies that emphasize self-reliance and risk. Women are also more likely to rely on government services, both as clients and as employees.”

Jesse Walker, an editor at *Reason* magazine, agrees that the libertarian gender gap is real, arguing that for “various historically contingent sociological reasons, the American libertarian movement has drawn a lot on subcultures that are heavily male (computer programmers, for example), and that in turn had something of a self-perpetuating effect.” Aside from computer programming, libertarianism overlaps with other male-dominated subcultures as science-fiction fandom, the gaming community, Men’s Rights Activists, and organized humanism/atheism. But this account simply raises another question: Why do overwhelmingly male subcultures feel an affinity for libertarianism?

Walker’s colleague Katherine Mangu-Ward offers a parallel explanation, noting, “Libertarianism has historically been a fringe movement. And fringes tend to be populated by men. There are exceptions, of course, but in general if you investigate the long tails of any bell curve you’re going to discover a sausage fest, and libertarianism is no exception.”

Both Walker and Mangu-Ward contend that the libertarian gender gap has been shrinking in recent years, and that women are much more common in the organized libertarian movement than ever before. The evidence Walker and Mangu-Ward offer is anecdotal, based on their years of experience in the libertarian movement. “Once upon a time, being a libertarian with two X chromosomes made me a rare bird, desperately coveted by think-tank panel moderators and conference organizers,” Mangu-Ward recalls. “Nowadays, lady libertarians are a dime a dozen.” These explanations are suggestive, but a turn towards the history of libertarianism might offer deeper reasons for the libertarian gender gap.

Libertarian thinkers like the late economist F.A. Hayek dubiously claim their ideas have roots in classical liberalism, but libertarianism, as a self-conscious political formation, really emerged as a reaction to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. And while it might have been at the start a fringe movement made up largely of men, women intellectuals were indispensable in creating libertarianism.

In his 2007 book *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement*, Brian Doherty gives pride of place to what he calls "the three furies of libertarianism": Ayn Rand, Isabel Paterson, and Rose Lane Wilder. In 1943, all three published pivotal books that became the cornerstones of the libertarian movements: Rand's *The Fountainhead*, Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom* and Paterson's *The God of the Machine*. As David Boaz of the Cato Institute argued in 1997, "In 1943, at one of the lowest points for liberty and humanity in history, three remarkable women published books that could be said to have given birth to the modern libertarian movement."

In his 2004 biography of Paterson, *The Woman and the Dynamo*, literary scholar Stephen Cox notes that Paterson "started as an outsider, and she remained on; she had to struggle for life, then for identity and recognition. Much the same could be said of Lane [and] Rand.... People who were used to doing for themselves might have a larger conception than other people of the things that individuals can and ought to do for themselves."

Rand, Paterson, and Lane were all exceptional women who thrived in a male-dominated world of journalism and publishing. This fact both explains their libertarianism but also suggests its limits. It is true that throughout history there have been extraordinary women who have overcome many of the barriers of patriarchy. But feminism—and any political efforts to improve the lot of all women—isn't aimed at outliers or those who can overcome structural hurdles through talent or luck. Feminism is aimed at overcoming the problems of women as a group.

While libertarianism is rarely explicitly sexist, it is hostile to collective efforts to challenge sexism: anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, paid leave, and the broader net of social services that are particularly necessary to those who have historically been tasked with care-giving jobs within the family. No wonder women as a whole find little in libertarianism that appeals to them.

Rand, Paterson, and Lane left another legacy: They gave libertarianism a historical narrative. They were all nostalgists who celebrated the rough-and-tumble capitalism of the nineteenth century, which they saw as being subverted by the progressive era and the New Deal. (Lane's role in editing and possibly ghostwriting her mother's famous *Little House on the Prairie* series is suggestive of how powerful nostalgia was in her life.) This type of yearning for the America of the Robber Barons has little to offer most women (who might not want to return to a world where they couldn't vote and had severely restricted social lives) or for that matter most non-whites (who might recall Jim Crow segregation). As Brian Doherty notes, "American blacks or women ... might find libertarian complaints about government growth silly. Most of them certainly feel freer in many important ways than they would have in the nineteenth century."

To a significant degree, libertarianism is a philosophy that exalts a world where white men enjoyed enormous freedom, but other groups were even more marginalized than they are now. How surprising is it, then, that politicians like Paul who voice libertarian ideas have a fan base that is overwhelmingly made up of white men?

To his credit, Paul seems aware that this nostalgic strain in libertarianism has to give way to a more inclusive politics. He's made a concerted effort to court black voters by emphasizing the need to reform the racial disparities of the criminal justice system. But Paul hasn't made a comparable effort to tailor the libertarian message to appeal to women, which, given his dismal poll numbers among Republican women, he'll need to do if he wants to compete in 2016.