Politics at the Margin
Historical Studies of Public Expression
Outside the Mainstream

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makes the party seem much older. In this way, the LP becomes traditional, in the sense that its ideas have been part of American politics and culture for a long time. Beyond history, reference to the Founding Fathers gives a certain air of legitimacy to the party. And finally, this sort of rhetoric preempts attacks on libertarianism as somehow "un-American." If the Founding Fathers were, in fact, Libertarians, then the LP should hardly be a threat to Americans or their value system.

David Bergland, Libertarian presidential candidate in the 1984 election, points out that there are several "obstacles to clear thinking" that prevent people from understanding libertarianism.22 First, he posits, there is the "stupidity fallacy": As a people we tend to forget that government is an aggregation of people, not an all-powerful, faceless body that decides our fate. If we think of the government as an institution made up of people, we can think more critically about its actions, and feel less intimidated by it, Bergland argues. Another fallacy is something Bergland calls "PANG" — the "People Are No Good" assumption. He explains,

The unstated premise [of the PANG fallacy] is that people are weak, stupid, helpless, incompetent, dishonest, and dangerous to themselves and others. . . . Social Security programs are necessary because people would not otherwise provide for their own future, . . . drug laws are necessary because without them we would be a nation of stoned-out people incapable of doing anything, . . . [and] compulsory school attendance laws are necessary because parents wouldn't bother to educate their children. . . . If the PANG premise were valid, then government personnel making the rules for the rest of us and exercising power over us would necessarily have to do so in a weak, stupid, helpless, incompetent and dangerous manner. If the PANG premise were valid, the last thing anyone would want is a large, powerful government being managed by such people. As one wag put it: "If people are basically good, you don't need a government; if people are basically bad, you don't dare have one."21

Another "fallacy," Bergland argues, is that "laws work." He posits that people often do what they want anyway, so many laws are simply ineffectual. To make his point, he uses the Prohibition illustration, a popular example among Libertarians. In the 1920s and 1930s, when alcohol production and consumption were banned, drinking declined only slightly and crime rates soared. Prohibition was eventually repealed, since its benefits were minimal. Similarly, millions of Americans currently smoke marijuana, despite antidrug laws meant to deter this behavior.

A final "fallacy" cited by Bergland, which comes up repeatedly in conversations with Libertarians, is what he calls the "free lunch fallacy." Libertarians do not believe that citizens have a right to low cost (or free) health care, or even a free education. From the libertarian perspective, someone always pays for someone else's services. Whether or not one has children in public school, uses the local park or recreation facilities, or receives unemployment compensation, he or she must pay for these services in the forms of property and income taxes. The Libertarians firmly believe that "nothing is free," nor should it be.

Libertarians are political outsiders. Very few Americans understand their ideological system, and only in 1980 did their presidential candidate win over 1 percent of the popular vote (Ed Clark received 1.1 percent in the 1980 election). Systematic, empirical evidence about why Libertarians are marginalized is difficult to come by, because most people haven't even heard of the party. I believe that there are several reasons why the LP is a marginal force in American politics. First, Bergland is probably correct about our generalized trust and reliance on government.23 Despite some declines of trust in government as measured by social surveys, it is very difficult for most citizens to imagine dismantling the regulations, tax structure, and social programs we've created. In their 1992 election platforms, both major parties emphasized the critical role of government in our lives, although the Democrats tend to be more explicit about the expansion of social programs.

A second reason why Libertarians are marginal is that a variety of demagogic and disreputable public figures have loudly and repeatedly claimed that they are Libertarians. As a result, people tend to associate such individuals with the party. One of these men is Lyndon LaRouche — a charismatic figure who was convicted on fraud and conspiracy charges in 1988.24 When I began studying the Libertarians years ago, friends and colleagues, upon hearing about my work, would immediately name LaRouche as an LP figure. This association of the party with such a man is aggravating to the Libertarians, who argue that LaRouche does not hold (and never has) libertarian positions. In fact, LaRouche followers often run as Democrats.

Other reasons why the Libertarians are marginal include their lack of funds for extensive political advertising, and their absence from election coverage in the news media. Although in some local areas smaller news-
other words, should Libertarians try to sell their ideas to local, state, and national politicians by becoming more of a pressure group and less of an independent party? Throughout history, other marginal groups have often found backchannel communication—which is what interest groups use to achieve their goals—very useful. Yet the behind-the-scenes communication that backchannels demand is characterized by compromise, which makes some Libertarians uncomfortable. A few activists I spoke with understand these problems well. The man who often talks about politics at his office explained:

[My boss] says we [Libertarians] really can't make a difference because of some of [our] extreme positions, or until we get somebody [a national candidate] who is not so philosophical. . . . [We won't succeed] unless we would modify, or change, or become, I guess, better salespersons. . . . There's a tendency in the party to be very much of a purist philosophically and politically, and not be very practical [in order to become more popular with the public]. . . .

In both cases of intentional political marginality studied here—the Libertarians and The Masses socialists—activists maintain their marginality through extremism and an unwillingness to compromise. As the man just quoted notes, the Libertarians' marginality problem is a multifaceted one: They are outsiders because of their intellectual purity, their radicalism, and their rhetorical strategies or presentational tactics.

The marginalization of the Libertarians, and the frustration they feel concerning their outsider status, challenges many of the assumptions students of politics tend to make. Most of the scholarly literature in American politics either ignores or dismisses third parties, usually with rather superficial commentary. Since Libertarians, and other established third parties, don't receive many votes in the typical election, political scientists tend to discount them as uninteresting.33 It seems as though scholars analyze third-party "threats" to the two-party system only when some charismatic candidate appears on the national scene (e.g., Wallace, Anderson, or Perot).34 This approach—studying individual third party candidates, who temporarily seize public attention—does not help us understand the deeper problems of political marginality, however. If we are to comprehend organized political dissent we must study third parties regardless of whether they field a successful presidential candidate. From the case of the Libertarians, for example, we can learn much about political outsiders—their inter-

actions with the mass media and elected officials, how they maintain their organizations, and why they do what they do.

Beyond learning about marginality from cases of political radicalism, studying activists enables us to ask and answer broader questions about political participation in America. In these days of political cynicism and alienation, the Libertarians are truly an anomaly: They keep up their struggle despite some serious electoral and "public relations" setbacks (e.g., the Lyndon LaRouche problem). Libertarians believe in the free market, and the protection of civil liberties, with an intensity and consistency we rarely see in American politics today. By comparison, the two major parties are so large, and so opportunistic, that their ideologies seem to become less and less coherent over time: Many citizens fail to see the differences between the two major parties, except in the most general terms—that one party is conservative and the other liberal. This inability to see the clash between party ideologies, plus a growing distrust of politicians, breeds a general unhappiness with "politics as usual" among many Americans. Libertarians, in contrast, are undaunted by the kind of political alienation that is pervasive in American politics today. If students of politics are truly interested in the fundamental bases of political participation, they would do best to study ideal-typical activists—those who do political work regardless of short-term failure.