

In Search of Student Radicalism: YAL, SFL, and the GOP

Brandon Christensen
notesonliberty.com

Below is an informal, ethnographic account of my short stint as a member of Young Americans for Liberty (YAL), followed by some critical remarks. I want to thank Irfan Khawaja and Carrie-Ann Biondi for encouraging discussion on this topic.¹

I edit the group blog *Notes on Liberty* and consider myself to be a small-L libertarian. I graduated from UCLA in 2013 and majored in cultural anthropology, a discipline often derided by libertarians. I took enough classes on the Middle East and North Africa to minor in the subject. I did not write a senior thesis, but I did win a spot at an Honors consortium at Stanford University to present my work on Javanese political strategies and the Dutch East Indies Company's response to them in the early nineteenth century. I also led a small team on an ethnographic survey of two prominent student groups on campus, one that was pro-Israeli and one that was pro-Palestinian. While my accomplishments are not many or prestigious, they were done well and in a unique manner: I was voluntarily homeless for much of my time in Westwood; my story was featured in UCLA's A&E monthly, though for personal safety reasons it was abridged.²

My experience with libertarian youth organizations on campus began in early 2012, when I finally decided that I needed to incorporate some fellow libertarians into my social circles. The experience was awful, but in a way that has become useful for me in terms of understanding how organizations work and why they fail.

YAL itself is a non-profit founded by Ron Paul supporters after his successful 2008 presidential run (successful by libertarian standards, anyway). It is a little different from Students for Liberty (SFL, also founded in 2008) but I cannot tell how, nor can I explain why, only one group was represented

¹ Irfan Khawaja and Carrie-Ann Biondi, "Editorial," *Reason Papers* 36, no. 1 (2014), pp. 12-14, accessed online at: http://reasonpapers.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/rp_361_0.pdf.

² Loic Hostetter, "Close to Home," *Prime*, March 6, 2013, accessed online at: <http://dailybruin.com/2013/03/06/close-to-home/>.

at a school with 29,000 undergraduates. The ethnic composition of the group I interacted with—an important, if superficial, means of understanding an organization—was mostly Asian and, after that, Hispanic. WASPs such as myself were few in number, and I suspect mostly there for the intellectual kick we thought we would be getting. The Asians and the Hispanics both seemed, in my mind, to be the children of immigrants. Only one was a foreigner, a Chinese student and first-year economics major who fancied himself “an Austrian” (economist). The Asian contingent largely had ties to the Indian subcontinent and were studying some branch of engineering, though the founder of the chapter, an Indian-American, was a political science major with aspirations of becoming a behind-the-scenes operative for the Republican Party.

The Republican Party youth group at UCLA, Bruin Republicans, is dominated by white Greek students. I hope there is some data out there to contradict my clichéd ethnographic description, but I suspect that the odds and the gods are acting as one on this issue. YAL and Bruin Republicans had, for reasons I could easily fathom but not accept, a close working relationship, with YAL acting as the junior partner. The informal Young GOP functions bore especially good fruit for explaining why there were essentially two Republican youth groups on campus: alcohol-fueled jokes about blacks, Muslims, and Mexican immigrants are not particularly well-received by non-white conservatives or skinny, Rothbard-reading WASPs. Some stick it out, of course. American males with Chinese, Korean, and Filipino backgrounds made up a respectable portion of the Bruin Republicans. Japanese-Americans all seem to be Democrats, and this in spite of the fact that President Franklin D. Roosevelt threw their great-grandparents into prison camps during World War II.

In general, though, non-white conservatives possess a political refugee status on campus and the libertarian group fills a niche role in this regard: YAL and SFL are havens for conservatives still uncomfortable with their place in the broader GOP hierarchy. As a result, the libertarian group at UCLA is more conservative than libertarian, and therefore more tolerant of both the “fusionism” that has defined post-war right-wing politics in the United States and the strategies adopted by political activists (discussed below).³

I only attended two or three group meetings. All were held in the evenings, in a university-sanctioned classroom at a university-sanctioned time. There were eight people, give or take a few, and all were male. It was a new year and I volunteered to be the Activities Coordinator. My first (and only) task was to set up a trip to go shoot guns at a nearby gun range. The idea was not mine, and if I recall correctly it was borrowed from another chapter whose antics were highlighted on YAL’s webpage. I reserved a time and a place,

³ SFL is more vocally skeptical of fusionism than YAL, but prominent members of the Republican Party still adorn its website.

named the event “Fun With Guns,” plastered a photo of Elmer Fudd onto the event’s webpage, and sent out the Facebook invites. I was politely reprimanded for not going through leadership and getting its approval prior to sending out the invites. There were worries that some people—whether college administrators or YAL’s professional regional coordinators—might get the wrong impression.

This may seem like an insignificant or even petty detail, but the reprimand to get my volunteer work pre-approved did not sit well with me. Aside from my general distrust of bureaucratic formalities for student groups, of which the polite reprimand was most certainly an instance, there was also a disagreement about which outside student groups should be invited to “Fun With Guns.” I suggested that YAL reach out to the black, Muslim, and Hispanic groups around campus, on the strength of Adam Winkler’s 2011 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* about gun rights and minorities that had been in the back of my mind.⁴ I did not have time to mention Winkler’s essay, though, because too many people began explaining to me why such a notion was impossible. Instead, an invitation was extended to the Bruin Republicans and perhaps a student gun club.

Provocative discussion about ideas and history—libertarianism’s bread and butter—was brushed aside. After all, the goal of YAL—as outlined from its headquarters in Washington, D.C.—is to grow chapters and reach out to organizations it deems friendly, not engage in armchair theorizing.

Out of a pool of 29,000 students, eight or maybe nine people showed up to “Fun With Guns” and I was not among them.

I had stopped going to club meetings after it became apparent that ideas were not going to be discussed there. However, I was still a member of the chapter’s Facebook group and an occasional contributor to the discussions going on there, until I got into an argument about how better to advocate for freer trade. Comparative advantage is, to my mind, the most important concept in all of the social sciences, and one that, when properly understood, gently shifts the worldview of people in a more libertarian direction. This, coupled with my respect for chapter two of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, made for the trappings of a good debate.

A student from a YAL chapter at a community college in the San Fernando Valley argued that YAL members should be patting protectionists on the head, empathizing with them, and then informing them that we—libertarians, that is—respectfully disagree with their position. He provided numerous articles from libertarian organizations to supplement his argument. I favored an approach that treats the curious and the adversarial as peers rather than as children or enemies (I still do). I did not engage in the argument with

⁴ Adam Winkler, “The Secret History of Guns,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 24, 2011), accessed online at: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/the-secret-history-of-guns/308608/?single_page=true.

the goal of changing the man's mind. I merely wanted to present my view and let others come to their own conclusions.

Unfortunately, I came away from the argument with the conviction that student political organizations do more harm than good (at least if "truth" is your end goal), and recent quantitative research by a political sociologist suggests that my initial impression was correct. A 2014 essay by Kyle Dodson shows that student political groups tend to radicalize or solidify a student's previously held political views, whereas more interaction in the classroom with professors tempers political convictions.⁵ Insult was added to injury when the entire dialogue on free-trade advocacy, which was open to be read by all who wished to do so, was anonymously deleted with no explanation (although, to be fair, I did not ask for one). I suspect it was deleted for the sake of group unity, or something along those lines.

The aversion to dialogue solidified my suspicions about political student groups in general: discussion about ideas was discouraged, and when ideas were brought up in any form they were quickly squelched (or erased) by a leadership committee that had to be directly approved of by a bureaucratic process implemented from afar. The appeal to group unity, or group goals, or the authority of group headquarters is often an excuse used by individuals to exercise power, of course, but the problem of authority will nevertheless remain as long as a Washington-based non-profit is the foundational support for libertarian student groups.

My experience with libertarian student groups could be summarized as follows: talk was limited to discussions on how best to mimic other projects seen elsewhere (presumably ones advertised on the webpages of YAL and SFL), or on how poorly leftist organizations and professors treat libertarians and conservatives.⁶

A quick digression: The students who occupied so-called leadership positions (including myself) cannot be blamed for YAL's failure to attract and retain actual libertarians (much less others). All were intelligent, competitive, and creative individuals. One even managed to form a student group dedicated to bringing former Congressman and former Presidential candidate Ron Paul to campus. It was a long shot—Los Angeles is a Democratic stronghold and UCLA does not have the same politically conscious reputation as some other universities in the state—but he put in many extra hours of work. He had to form an entirely new student group and was constantly reminding people that his work could not be associated with YAL. His efforts brought Ron Paul, an

⁵ Kyle Dodson, "The Effect of College on Social and Political Attitudes and Civic Participation," *Professors and Their Politics*, ed. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 135-57.

⁶ Now that I think about it, there was a short—three- or four-minute—debate on whether or not YAL's UCLA chapter should support abortion rights. The seven or eight of us in the room concluded that it would be better to continue publicly supporting individual choice *so as to better set us apart from Bruin Republicans*.

active presidential candidate at the time, to campus. Today, this same student does internships over the summer for Senator Rand Paul's office, no small feat considering the Senator's high-profile status. I mention this anecdote to drive home the point that the abject failure of YAL to retain libertarians can be pinpointed to the organizational structure of political student groups rather than to personal failings.

This organizational structure can be traced back to the speech codes that universities imposed upon their students in reaction to the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s. Readers of *Reason Papers* are no doubt well-aware of this situation, so I will not delve into any details here, but I do make note of the fact that my awful experience with YAL can largely be blamed on the academy's conservatism. The academy's conservatism, and my own ethnographic account of YAL, prompts two additional trains of thought.

On the one hand, public, political activism has never sat well with me; it reeks of Puritanism. Activist stunts and outreach programs create the impression that one set of views ("yours") is so urgent or superior to another set of views ("mine") that adherents of the former feel the need publicly to shame everyone else for either not paying better attention or implicitly agreeing with the *status quo* through silence.

Tabling on campus to obtain email addresses and handing out fliers for politically motivated activities also seems to me counter-productive. For instance, consider the following hypothetical: I am a politically apathetic student, or I associate with groups that are politically antagonistic to you, and am walking through campus. My hormones are raging, I just received a "B-" on a pop quiz in Stats 101, I have a date with a Persian brunette next Thursday, there is a scolding email simmering in the back of my mind from my mother demanding to know why I need some extra cash, and I have a shift at the student call center to ask for donations ("a crummy job") only an hour away. The last thing I want to deal with is a proselytizing ideologue informing me of my ignorance. Dodson's research again comes into play: most students already know where they stand politically.

On the other hand, there is an obvious need for student political groups. The networking potential and the educational opportunities provided by organizations like YAL cannot be denied. For instance, the recent blog post about cat-calling and sexual harassment by Juliana Perciavalle on the SFL website⁷ could not have reached as many people as it did without the support of SFL's bureaucratic apparatus. (Perciavalle's post had more of an impact than hundreds of hours of tabling could ever hope to have, too.)

Why then do libertarians have to copy the in-your-face style of other student political groups? Why not "Hayek and beer pong" a couple of times a

⁷ Juliana Perciavalle, "An Open Letter to Internet Libertarians and Street Harassment," *Students For Liberty* (blog), November 9, 2014, accessed online at: <http://studentsforliberty.org/blog/2014/11/09/an-open-letter-to-internet-libertarians-on-street-harassment/>.

month instead? I understand that the goal of the YALs and SFLs of the world is to organize politically, and I understand that an in-your-face element is inherent in democracy itself, but political libertarianism—such as it is—is still a carefully narrow movement that aims for success in small steps and on the margin.

In 1936 Albert Jay Nock wrote an essay arguing that appeals to the masses are far less satisfying than simply letting other like-minded individuals seek you out for camaraderie.⁸ There were no mass emails involved in enticing me to show up to meetings. The YAL table positioned on the main thoroughfare of campus did not attract me to libertarianism. I Googled “libertarian groups at UCLA” and then did the necessary research to track down who to contact and where to go. My efforts were greeted with attempts by YAL, through its organizational setup, to get me behind a table in my free time.

It is clear that the academy needs reforming in the area of free speech. It is clear that libertarianism is a severely misunderstood philosophical and political movement. It is clear that libertarianism’s narrow-but-cerebral framework sometimes has trouble meshing well with the realities of democratic governance. What is not so clear is whether or not libertarians themselves understand libertarian philosophy and politics. What is likewise unclear is whether libertarians themselves understand the goals and aspirations of political non-profits based in Washington, D.C. Thus, I would argue that libertarian student groups need a much softer approach to activism. There is no need for us to be in the faces of the apathetic or of the opposition, especially given the “humble creed”⁹ of classical liberalism.

Activist stunts might prove worthwhile every now and again. They might make a difference. They might even come from the creative founts of the students themselves rather than from a website. However, there is nothing humble about calling attention to the worries of our ideological quadrant in the manner advertised on the websites of YAL and SFL. Think of the implications: If libertarian student groups are engaged in political activism, and political activism runs counter to the libertarian ethos of live-and-let-live, then a number of important questions will begin to take form in the minds of many libertarians, not least of which is the efficacy of libertarianism.

I make these criticisms because I believe that the networking and educational opportunities identified above are ample, and I think that the public demonstrations of piety that SFL and YAL have been encouraging young libertarians to perform are pathetic. I suspect, but cannot prove beyond a doubt, that stunts are encouraged because they are believed to be exercises

⁸ Albert Jay Nock, “Isaiah’s Job,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1936), accessed online at: <http://mises.org/library/isaiahs-job>.

⁹ Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 8.

in team-building (rather than because they will have any impact whatsoever), and that Washington-based non-profits are more interested in molding Party leaders out of students than in fostering an eccentric, contrarian spirit necessary for citizenship in a free and open society.

My experience is rather typical for a libertarian, of course. The tension between the thinkers and the soldiers has always been present in the movement. As it stands, though, SFL and YAL have absolutely nothing in place to retain dissatisfied thinkers. Perhaps this is simply how it has always been, and I am naive for believing that libertarians could somehow have their cake and eat it, too.

