

THE LIBERTY GENERATION?

By Rikki Schlott

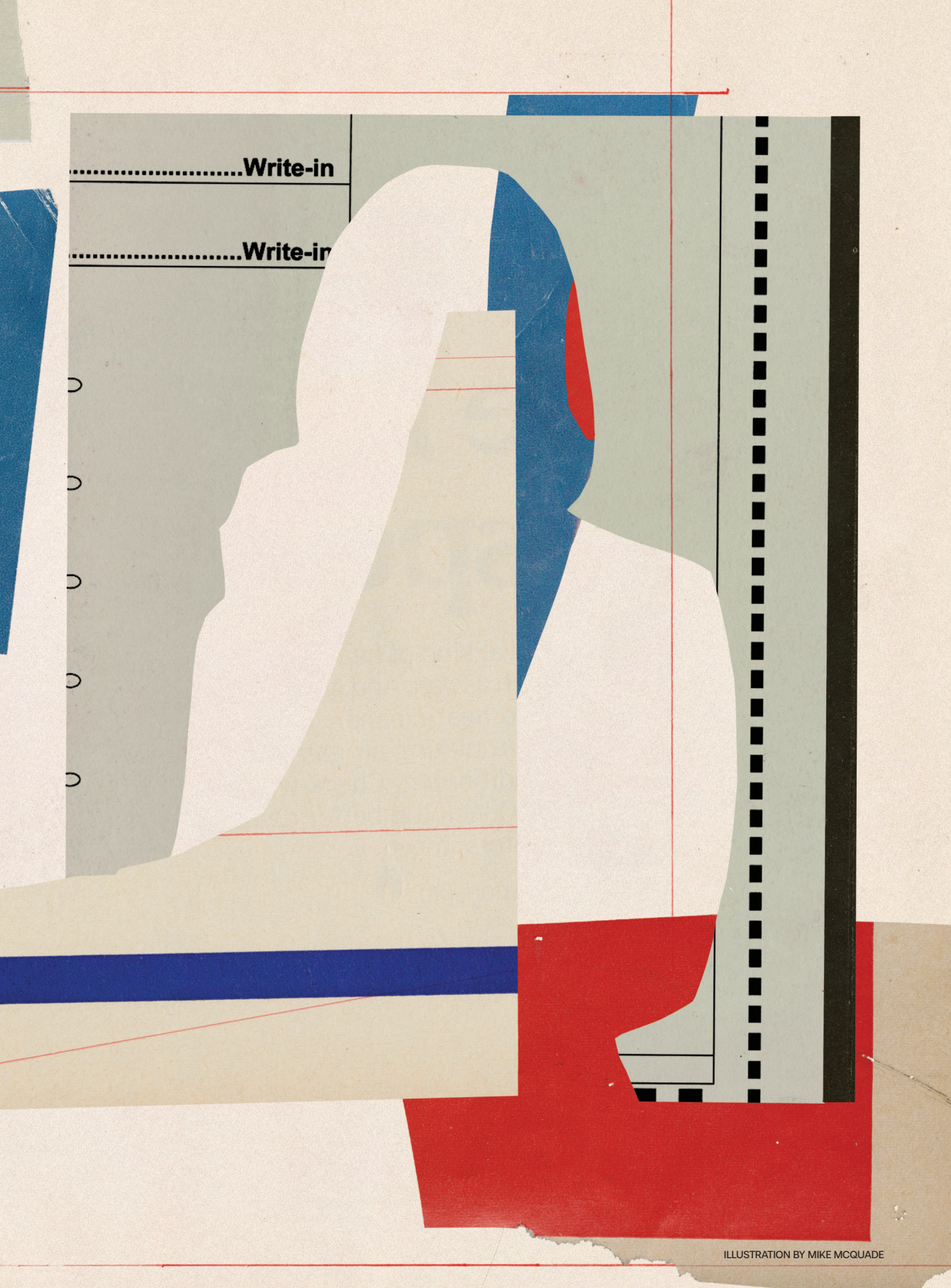


ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MCQUADE

Distrustful of government and disillusioned with both parties, many young Americans are searching for a political home. Those finding their way to libertarianism offer clues to reaching others in their generation.

Sergio Ortega was 18 when the pandemic sent his hometown of Rome, Georgia, into lockdown—and his parents' self-serve buffet out of business. "That was a major financial hit to my family, and that was my first teaching moment where I was like, 'Huh, government interventions have aftereffects that people don't really consider,'" he recalled. His family eventually opened a convenience store, where Sergio watched in horror as police officers harassed homeless people for the crime of being unhoused. He hadn't been raised with much exposure to politics, but lockdowns and policing suddenly made politics impossible to ignore. He just wasn't sure how to square his "right-coded" concern about lockdowns with his "left-coded" concern about police conduct. A Google search—"what is a libertarian?"—gave him the vocabulary to make sense of his emerging worldview.

Sergio's story is hardly unique. Coming into your political own as a young person today is a disorienting process, polluted by the noise of internet influencers and steered by the invisible pull of algorithms. It's sent many young people into the arms of the far left or far right, who stand ready with simplistic explanations for our political and economic problems. But there are exceptions to the rule: young people who, despite all the extremism and hot takes, find libertarianism.

Their stories are instructive for the liberty movement because they so often point to the same conclusion: that the grievances of this generation do, in fact, have libertarian solutions. Young people today have lived through the government overreach of a global pandemic; watched their parents choose between "lesser of two evils" candidates for as long as they can remember; and seen the left lose their minds in a scourge of so-called wokeness and the right descend into their own reactionary version of illiberal groupthink. This is a generation totally disgusted with the political options before them, who are begging for an alternative worldview that would promote their flourishing. We just need to supply them with the libertarian answer.

I heard versions of Sergio's story again and again: A distinct failure of government had alienated these young libertarians from conventional politics. Many cited the pandemic, including Harrington Shaw, a 24-year-old student at George Mason University's Antonin Scalia Law School. "After seeing the government handle and mishandle it, and then make claims that I didn't think were justified by data . . . it made me really upset," he said. "Even some of my friends who were more trusting of the government . . . started to see the government as more of a threat to their daily life." By this point in his teens, Harrington



Sergio Ortega at his family's convenience store in Rome, Georgia. After lockdowns shuttered his parents' buffet, his concerns about government power deepened as he witnessed police harassing homeless people near the store, setting him on a path toward libertarianism. (Kelly Moore Photography)

was supplementing the Fox News playing in his conservative household with online outlets like the *Daily Wire*. But pandemic policy shook his certainty: "I guess I sort of started to see hypocrisy in the [first] Trump era—when government spending kept going up, when we were not making decisions in accordance with constitutional values or individual liberty, like the lockdowns, just lots of spending, government intervention, fiscal stimulus. I was just kind of like, 'What's going on?'"

The young libertarians I spoke with universally held out hope that their generation can be reached by the message of liberty, but nearly every single one recalled having to explain basic tenets of the worldview to skeptical peers who might not have realized that libertarians also oppose forever wars, are skeptical of tariffs, and aren't secretly Republicans. "You're just not ever taught, like, there's more than just the two options," said Rebekah Bushmire, a 20-year-old political science major from Georgia. "But I absolutely have hope, because I think a lot of young people are really unhappy with the current way the government runs and how much they overstep."



Harrington Shaw, a student at George Mason University's Antonin Scalia Law School, sees his generation's growing political disillusionment as a "huge opportunity for libertarianism." (Photo by Richie Downs)

Gen Z is in an unfortunate bind. They're the most diverse generation in history—whether by background, race, or sexuality—and yet they're being asked to attach their political identities to perhaps the most unsatisfying iteration of our two-party system in recent memory. Forty-four percent of Gen Zers identify as independent or unaffiliated with either political party, while only 12 percent say they feel "motivated and ready to participate" in this year's midterm elections, according to the 2026 Harvard Youth poll.

"I really started to become disillusioned with the idea that, if you say you're part of one party, then all of a sudden you take on all of their views," said Alec, a 25-year-old from Milwaukee who asked to withhold his last name. "When I said I'm a Democrat, then it was, 'Well, then you must believe all these things.' I remember just being like, 'That's an insane way of viewing the world.'" Alec broke with the Democratic Party during college, and he found libertarianism through sources like the *Fifth Column* podcast and *Reason* magazine. But he worries that peers coming to a similar crossroads are being seduced by unhelpful alternatives, like socialism or the alt-right. "At the end of the day, all these ideas have been tried before," he complained. "There's been America First. There's been populism before. There's been socialism before. A lot of times, young people think they're on the cutting edge of some new ideology, and it's like, no, that's just repurposed from the 1920s."

That disillusionment is fueling justified concern that young people are being seduced by simplistic ideologies. On one side of the Gen Z spectrum, streamer Nick

Fuentes has popularized a nationalist, isolationist, and outright bigoted worldview; on the other, folks like Hasan Piker push socialism and anti-American vitriol—and even praise Mao Zedong and the current Chinese Communist Party while glibly noting their "excesses." They're saying the most provocative things possible to generate views. Is it any wonder that disillusioned teenagers are embracing them as a way to rebel? Harrington has noticed that kids are increasingly drawn to the extremes. "I've definitely heard from my younger brother that a lot of his friends are into, like, Fuentes or Hasan Piker," Harrington said. "I think the younger generation sees the government as more of a uniparty apparatus. I've talked to young people on the left and right who essentially have the same grievance: They feel really ripped off by politicians who go join the establishment. And I think that makes you angry, and when you're angry, you're going to seek out people who share those feelings."

"In a moment of bleak, ceaseless pessimism, where the internet pushes 'a lot of sadness and tragedy,' Allie said the optimism that undergirds libertarianism appealed to her."

So far, shock jock commentators have been the most effective at harnessing that discontent, but Harrington still sees that generational rage as a "huge opportunity for libertarianism," held back only by an informational barrier. "If you don't understand the economics or the philosophy of it, then I think you're vulnerable to someone saying, 'I know exactly what's wrong with this. You have to go after this other team. They're bad. They're screwing you over. Come join me and the angry mob, and we'll fix it.'" Young people growing up online face a fundamental challenge: They have infinite access to information before they have the maturity to make sense of it. That's a formula for groupthink and simplistic solutions. Hope Hsieh, a 21-year-old former Cato intern from Los Angeles, experienced this dilemma with an added layer of social pressure: "My friends on social media would be like, 'Your silence is violence,' while I was still trying to figure out exactly where I stood."

Allie Jones, a 21-year-old senior at Criswell College, agreed. "There's this weird idea in 2026 that we all have to have an opinion on every political issue, and

that we're supposed to know so much about it—or at least have so much to say about it," she said. That's a tough task for a young adult still learning about the world. In college, a curriculum that took Allie back to first principles gave her room to think through her politics more deliberately. It was appealing in a world of right and left, black and white, because it seemed a little bit "punkish." In a moment of bleak, ceaseless pessimism, where the internet pushes "a lot of sadness and tragedy," Allie said the optimism that undergirds libertarianism appealed to her. "I really wanted to have faith in people. I wanted to have a political ideology that centers around the presumption that free people are good people," she said. "If you are looking for an ideology that's like, 'Oh, I just gotta be different,' well, libertarianism is very different. It is kind of the odd one out right now, at least. If we're going to talk about radicalism, radicalism doesn't necessarily have to be a bad or extreme thing."

Sergio, whom we met at the beginning of this piece, is now 24 and state secretary of the Libertarian Party of Georgia, dedicating his career to reaching other young people.



Hope Hsieh, 21, during her spring 2026 internship at Cato. As she formed her political views, pressure from friends on social media complicated the process of deciding where she stood. (Photo by Richie Downs)

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"We're in a perfect libertarian moment right now," he said. "Young people are completely disillusioned with mainstream politics. They just can't find a good home to house them." The only reason they're not flocking to libertarianism, he believes, is because of a "PR problem." It's clear that his generation is plagued by a sense that they can't get ahead, that everything has gone wrong for them, and that they need help climbing out of a hole they did not dig themselves. There's obviously a combination of truth and fiction in that narrative, but dismissing young people's experiences or simply saying no to the things they feel they're entitled to is a losing strategy. "Affordability is the biggest thing on everyone's mind right now," Sergio said. "[Libertarians] just have to frame [their solutions] in a way that's more compassionate, more empathetic." Emma Camp, a 26-year-old journalist at the *Wall Street Journal*, agreed. "I'm seeing a lot of dunking on socialists, but not enough optimism about all the cool stuff the free market can bring us," she said. Gen Z is a generation overwhelmed by the world, the media, bad news, and disempowering narratives. And they want to be seen and heard, not disregarded.

While many libertarians are alarmed at the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Sergio has another take: It should actually give them hope. A new worldview has broken out of the two-party paradigm—and there's no reason that libertarianism can't also break into mainstream consciousness. "A lot of the popularity of the DSA just has to do with the fact that they're different, that they're presenting a different message, and that their whole platform is basically, 'We are not the same as the mainstream candidates,'" he said. "Of course, the DSA and libertarians are pretty diametrically opposed, but they can both activate the fervor that young people have: They're just looking for something different." This is a generation begging for an alternative, driven by a strong skepticism of our political leaders and an unbending sense of justice. They're arriving with the raw material; they just need to be shown that freedom can answer their legitimate grievances. ✦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rikki Schlott is a media fellow at the Cato Institute, a columnist at the *New York Post*, coauthor of *The Canceling of the American Mind*, and author of the forthcoming *Nothing Serious: How Modern Love Lost Meaning (and How We Can Restore It)*.