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The Private Voice: Homeschooling, Hannah Arendt, and Political Education

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ABSTRACT

What becomes of the political orientation of American education when children are educated in the home rather than in public schools? Homeschooling critics raise concerns over the larger consequences: political exit and even indoctrination. Drawing on a recent study of 62 interviews with 35 homeschooling families in 11 states in the USA, we offer a theoretical argument grounded in empirical observations and perceptions of homeschoolers themselves. Using the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt as a guide, we suggest that, contrary to critics' claims of political exit over voice, homeschooling may provide the opportunity for some families to respond with a "private voice" that is politically robust because it is intentionally subversive to a (perceived) homogenous dominant culture. We thus argue that some homeschoolers offer an understanding of private life that is political without being "public," and that they reconcile this irony by attempting to cultivate reflexive "thinking" in their children regarding questions of conformity, materialism, and plurality.

What is the purpose of education in late-modern societies? Although job skills and economic interests are the important factors in current public discussions, the primary purpose in the historical emergence of modern, state-sponsored schooling was political: to create citizens that would sustain the ideal of the "nation" (Anderson, 1991; Bendix, 1977; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Meyer, Tyack, Nagel, & Gordon, 1979; Ramirez & Boli, 1987; Weber, 1976). It remains true that education plays an important role in socializing for citizenship and civic participation in liberal democratic societies (Dewey, 1997 [1916]; Gutmann, 1999; Labaree, 1997; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). In the United States, the very idea behind Horace Mann's "common school" in the 1830s was to gather children from the private spaces of their homes and churches, a variety of denominational and ethnic backgrounds, into the public school to create a unified "American" identity committed to the public good (Emirbayer, 1992; Glenn, 1987).

What becomes of this primary political orientation of education if children are not in public schools, but rather educated in the home? What effect does the growing homeschooling movement in the United States have on this notion of political education? The homeschooling population in the United States has more than doubled since 1999, according to estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2017), and now likely includes more than two million students.[1]

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/hpje.

[1]The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated the figure at 1.77 million for 2012 (Redford et al., 2017, pp. 5–6) whereas the nonprofit National Home Education Research Institute estimated it at over two million for 2010 (Ray, 2011). The data for report from the National Center for Education Statistics should be taken as estimates. The National Household Education Survey, the data source for the homeschooling figures, changed its sampling procedure in 2011, and the NCES has recently withdrawn some of its published data on homeschooling due to concern about the validity of its adjusted figures. The range of their estimates is from 1,543,000 to 2,003,000. See the "Technical Notes" section of Redford et al., 2017.

As homeschooling continues to expand, concerns and criticisms of this unique educational approach also increase. Several scholars argue that homeschooling is potentially dangerous for democratic societies because homeschoolers opt out of public education and therefore opt out of participation in and debate about the public good. Homeschooling may not cultivate "public" virtue, they argue, precisely because it is "private" in its orientation – it is focused on the private family and its needs and wants, not the "public good" of the nation (Apple, 2000; Curren & Blokhuis, 2011; Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2005; Ross, 2010). Public schools, they suggest, are better suited for forming citizens because they create diverse environments and teach tolerance and understanding across differences.

Critics are also concerned that, lacking exposure to the diverse people and ideas of public schools, homeschooled students are vulnerable to indoctrination. Curren and Blokhuis (2011) critique the idea of homeschooling on the grounds that, in principle, a "common school" is essential for a liberal democratic society because children need to learn "a common language of civil discourse, in a setting where they encounter diverse peers yet share a common status as free and equal citizens-in-the-making" (p. 4). The authors describe common schools as providing a "nonrepressive education" and suggest homeschooling may create fertile ground for the opposite. Placing too heavy a weight on the judgment of one or two people (namely, the parents), homeschooling "undermines the project of public knowledge" (Curren & Blokhuis, 2011, p. 7). For Ross (2010), this means there is a risk of indoctrination, as the limited content and worldview provided by homeschooling families might object to "religious tolerance and critical thinking" (pp. 1000, 1005).

Lubienski (2000) takes the argument against homeschooling further, arguing that it is intrinsically against the "common good" because it elevates "private goods over public goods" (p. 207). Mass education is a public good with positive economic externalities, where "'society' is a 'consumer' of education, enjoying the benefits of an educated populace" (p. 211). For Lubienski (2000), homeschooling is ironic, because at the same time that our society recognizes education as "arguably the institution most open to public input through traditions of local control, elections, millages, and school conferences," homeschooling families claim that there is "no legitimate public interest" in education (p. 214). Homeschooling, Lubienski tells us, "does not simply throw off balance the symbiosis between public and private interests in education. It throws it out" (p. 215).

Theoretically, these criticisms seem plausible: homeschooling does withdraw around "private" interests of the family, disengaging from the "public" space of the local school. For Lubienski (2000), faced with the problems and current challenges of public education, we "have two options: exit or voice" (p. 223). By choosing exit over voice, homeschoolers undermine "the democratic potential of the institution to respond to citizens' voices," allowing democratic atrophy to enter (Lubienski, 2000, p. 226). But do homeschoolers see themselves as withdrawing around private interests at the expense of their democratic voice?

Although many of these questions and concerns about homeschooling may be empirical questions (do homeschoolers become "bad citizens" as compared to their public schooled peers by some measure of citizenship?),[2] there are also complex issues of social and political theory that lie beneath the surface of the empirical. We utilize Hannah Arendt's theories of public and private spaces, focusing on her articulation of the political nature of "thinking"[3] and her concern over the rise of the "social" realm, to help us understand homeschoolers' withdrawal. Our argument, grounded in empirical observations and perceptions of homeschooled students

[2]The empirical evidence is mixed. Some argue that homeschoolers make "good citizens" (see Ray, 2004; the sample in this study was not representative of the homeschool population, and a public school control group was not included in the study, so national averages are used for comparisons; Cheng, 2014; Smith & Sikkink, 1999). But some recent studies with longitudinal data suggest different results and show less civic activity for young adults who were homeschooled (see Hill & Den Dulk, 2013; Pennings, Seel, Neven Van Pelt, Sikkink, & Wiens, 2011).

[3]To be clear, we are not arguing that Arendt (1971)would approve or disapprove of homeschooling. Rather, we find her framing of "thinking" a helpful way to understand how a private activity in late-modernity may "cease to be a marginal affair in political matters" (p. 445). Arendt is obviously not writing about homeschoolers, and homeschoolers are not citing Arendt in their articulations of their ideas. But we suggest that the homeschoolers in this study are Arendtian in important ways.

and their parents, is that amidst shifting boundaries in late modernity, private life may be political without being "public."[4] We suggest that some homeschoolers[5] reconcile this irony by attempting to cultivate a "private voice" of reflexive thinking in their children.[6]

Drawing on Arendt's ideas, we argue that some homeschoolers, united by a negative narrative[7] opposing a perceived social conformism in conventional schools, are making a political move by the act of withdrawing to a private space precisely because they see themselves as cultivating a kind of independent thinking that is critical in late-modern democratic societies. If homeschooling can activate such a "private voice," it may not sustain the ideal of the "nation" but neither may it be explained as a nonpolitical withdrawal. We suggest that for some homeschoolers, opting out of public education is itself an expression of an argument about the public good and the public risks of conformity.

Data and method

Data in this paper are drawn from an interview-based study of homeschoolers and includes 62 interviews from 35 families in 11 states around the USA from 2013–2016.[8] The study targeted specific regions of the country for participant recruitment, and we made initial contact with local homeschool groups, usually at the state level, who in turn circulated an informational document about the study through their email listserve.[9] As interested participants responded, they answered some general screening and demographic questions so we could build a targeted, purposive sample that captured the diversity in the homeschool population within

[4]In this paper, we argue that *political* has a broader meaning than what we usually consider as activity in the realm of civic affairs in relation to the state. Arendt sees politics as Aristotle (2002) did – we are political animals because we have the capacity to speak with each other about the world and what is just and unjust, good and evil, useful and useless, and then actually do something about it (p. 1253a). This ability to speak and act with each other is what draws light and meaning into our world – politics thus begins as a way to preserve a space for the freedom to do this very human activity (Arendt, 1961, p. 146; 2005, p. 128). And so, though all aspects of human society (for Arendt, labor and work) are related to political life in some way, politics itself is something we do for its own sake, distinguished from the things we must do because they are necessary (1958, p. 13, 2005, p. 119). "The meaning of politics is freedom," Arendt (2005, p. 108) reminds us. Thus, quoting a letter of Jefferson's, Arendt (1963) writes that to be "a participator in public affairs" is more than voting, and more than managing other men (p. 128); in the words of Tocqueville (2002), what is at stake when we reduce politics to that narrow conception of voting and governing is the experience of freedom itself (II.4.7).

[5]We want to be clear: we are not arguing that all homeschooling families align with the political act of resistance in private life that we outline here. We fully acknowledge that the homeschooling population is highly diverse and that there are undoubtedly families for whom the critics' concerns may be accurate. Here we simply provide empirical data alongside a theoretical framework to suggest that there are many homeschooling families that complicate the critics' concern that homeschooling is necessarily contradictory to the common goods of democratic life.

[6]The idea of "thinking" is as old as the nature of philosophic dialogue. For theorists like Charles Taylor (1991), individual identity has a "dialogic" character, a notion he borrows from George Herbert Mead, and through which we receive our "horizons of significance" (33ff). Other social theorists, most notably Margaret Archer (2003), distinguish the interior dialogue from that which Taylor speaks of and that which we may hold with a friend. Though the kinds of internal conversation differ, many theorists suggest that our mode of "reflexivity," or thinking, can sustain and transform our social worlds, mediating between social structures and individual agency (Donati & Archer, 2015; Vandenberghe, 2014,; Wiley, 2016).

[7]By *negative narrative*, we mean that by which homeschooling families are seen as united across a wide range of motivations: whether they homeschool because of religious reasons, pedagogical reasons, lifestyle (family moves a lot), special needs, etc., they all have a vision of what their children need that, in their perception, is not provided by conventional education. Although they homeschool for different reasons, they are united by what they stand against – the public school. For some families, the explicitly "political" aspect of that negative narrative ends here – they aren't trying to make a political statement and simply want room to do what they see as best for their family. But others draw on their own experience and that of their friends as basis for a political critique against conventional education and, in their perception, the conformity symbolized by it. Both kinds, we argue, are political by implication.

[8]This research was conducted as part of the School Culture and Student Formation Project at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. See http://iasculture.org/research/culture-formation/school-cultures-and-student-formation-project.

[9]That document first described the larger, collaborative study like this: "The *School Cultures and Student Formation Project*, hosted at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, is a nation-wide research study of moral and civic education in high schools. The project seeks to understand the various ways that high schools influence the life direction of students, especially regarding moral and civic development, systematically exploring distinctive approaches to character and citizenship education across a variety of different school sectors: public and private, religious and secular, and homeschooling."

the limits of our small sample size. It should be noted that given the constraints of this sampling procedure, the study sample is not representative of the homeschool population. See Table 1 for sample data and Figure 1 for a map of interview locations.

A researcher visited participant families to conduct semistructured interviews with one parent and one or more high school age student (on a few occasions we interviewed siblings together). Usually interviews were conducted in the family's home, but in some cases the interviews took place in parks or at co-op locations out of convenience for the family's schedule. In addition to these interviews, researchers collected observations of homeschool activities at co-operative classes, summer camps, conferences, and industry conventions.

We acknowledge that given the challenges of sampling in this population, there are various selection effects at work in our sample; families that are more interested, aware, and articulate about their visions of common life are more likely to select into a study such as ours. Families that are more isolated and consciously removed from common concerns are less likely to select into the study. To reiterate, our sample is not representative of the homeschool population, and thus we cannot generalize any conclusions we reach from our sample to the larger homeschool population. In spite of these sampling challenges, listening to and understanding the voices of homeschoolers (as limited as they may be) is a critical step in addressing the larger questions homeschooling raises in liberal democratic societies.

It is also important to note that our interview data do not offer "proof" of homeschoolers' civic activities. The data offer insights into homeschoolers' self-understandings and perceptions, allowing us to hear how they narrate their educational choices in light of questions about commitments beyond their own self-interests. But we argue that perceptions are never merely ideas isolated within individual minds; perceptions frequently carry social consequences. The important sociological point is that the human imagination is a powerful force, and perceptions have a way of palpably

Table 1. Demographic data.

		N	Percent
Race/ethnicity			
	White (Non-Hispanic)	28	80
	White (Mixed Marriage)	4	11
	Black (Non-Hispanic)	2	6
	Hispanic	1	3
Parent gender			
	Female	33	94
	Male	2	6
Student gender			
	Female	16	45
	Male	19	55
Marital status			
	Single, never married	1	3
	Married	32	91
	Divorced	2	6
Parent education			
	High school	3	9
	Some college/technical	6	17
	Four-year degree	19	54
	Graduate degree	7	20
Household income (missing 3 cases)	Less than $30,000	2	6
	$30,000–$49,999	2	6
	$50,000–$74,999	7	20
	$75,000-$99,999	6	17
	$100,000 or more	14	40
Religious attendance			
	Never	6	17
	Once/twice a year	1	3
	Once a month	4	11
	Weekly or more	24	69
Political affiliation			
	Democrat	9	26
	Republican	20	57
	Other	6	17

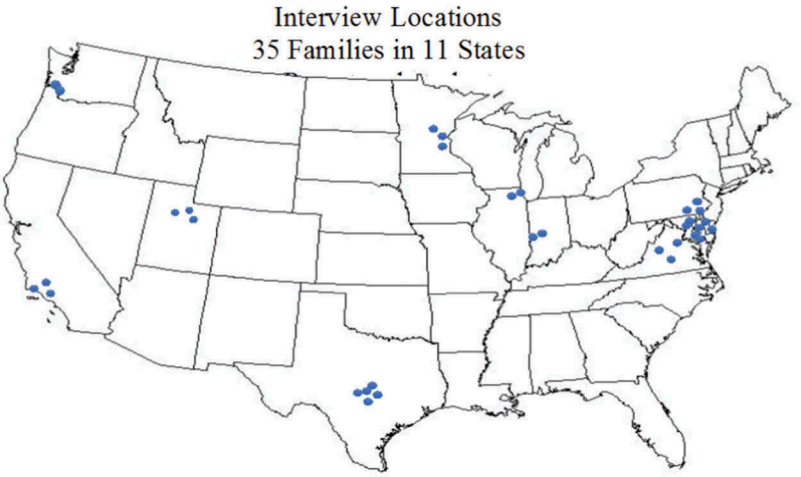

Figure 1. Interview locations 35 families in 11 states.

structuring the parameters of social life and interactions. This paper seeks to build from such perceptions to offer a theoretical account for how homeschoolers actually make political arguments about their educational efforts.

To explore this relationship between homeschoolers' perceptions and political narrations, we used a phenomenological approach to analyzing and interpreting the data in this paper, where careful attention was paid to how the justifications offered by homeschooling families – in other words, the way that they articulate the meanings of their educational choices – make sense within a larger framework of political and social theory.[10] Although our interview questions followed a basic shared pattern from the larger collaborative project (see note 8), we were particularly interested in how homeschoolers understand themselves and their actions as educators in the context of a late-modern liberal democracy where the act of homeschooling could be viewed as an antidemocratic, self-interested withdrawal from public life.

Confronted with these questions, we wondered what, if anything, we could say was held in common between the families in our sample. Seeing that one of the primary ways homeschooling families are united, and critiqued, is by a negative narrative of withdrawal from school, of educating in private in contrast to the public, we chose to ask what this means for the families themselves. What are they reacting against, and why do they see homeschooling as a legitimate alternative? As we coded and analyzed the data, it became clear that homeschoolers in this sample hold unconventional understandings of "private" and "public" life, and the relation of those spaces to a political education in pursuit of common goods. We turned to the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt to help make sense of these puzzles in the data and to assist in interpreting the self-understandings of homeschoolers in the sample. We begin with the voices of homeschoolers themselves and then turn to Arendt's theories to

[10]Although there is continual debate over what is and is not included in a phenomenological method of interpreting social scientific data (Bird, 2009; Van Manen, 2017), it begins by asking questions about the "phenomena" at hand, moving to theory and interpretation or explanation after detailed observation and description. For our study, this meant following a general pattern of questions in our interviews that focused on moral and civic formation, coding the data according to the patterns that began to emerge among participants, and then re-visiting the transcripts alongside theoretical accounts like that offered by Hannah Arendt. In following a phenomenological method, what is considered primary is the data itself (in our case, the articulated actions, perceptions, and justifications of the homeschooling families recorded in the interview transcripts and in our observation notes). The theory (Arendt) serves as an assistant in understanding the phenomenon (homeschooling), helping to expand the researchers' and readers' imaginations to better understand another's subjective world. See Bogdan and Taylor (1975) for more information on the process of a phenomenological method.

help make sense of how the way we think and construct our private lives relates to what it means to be "political."

A negative narrative: Resisting conformity

Simran Berner[11] is a Mormon unschooling[12] mom without a college degree and on her second marriage. When her oldest son was nearing graduation, she pulled her family out of conventional school, and later from co-operative groups and extracurricular activities. Simran's perception of conventional school is focused on who holds the most influence over the students:

> When you have 30 kids and one teacher, that teacher has some influence, but most of the influence is coming from the other 29 kids. And, those kids have not established themselves. They haven't become what they're going to become yet.

Simran seems to think that negative peer influences hinder this process of becoming, and that she's encouraging something in her children that might otherwise be restricted by peer pressures to conform.

Lauren Thompson, a Catholic homeschooling mom and former teacher in public schools, similarly articulates concerns over the influence of both educational authorities and peers in conventional schools:

> I don't necessarily want my kids to have the agenda that [the school is] proposing and I don't know that as a society we should want what they're proposing. From an educational perspective, following directions, listen to orders, you know, I don't think that that model is necessarily teaching our kids to stop and think, and to think for themselves, and to think about the betterment of society. It's very, "I need to get this done; I need to do it as fast as I possibly can."
>
> … I mean I just feel like they're trying to be accepted by their peers so they're gonna do things that they wouldn't necessarily – that they don't necessarily think are right or that they haven't developed enough to realize that it's wrong or the effects of their decisions now, you know, what that decision will do for them in the long run.

Lauren ties the persuasive influence of peers to the seemingly opposite utilitarian authority put forth by the school itself – the "agenda" of both is, for Lauren, to stilt an ability to "stop and think" about the impact of individual decisions and actions on the child's own future as well as in regards to the "betterment of society." Lauren sees both as influences opposing children's ability to "think for themselves." As she continues in the interview, Lauren's solution is to draw attention to the benefit of private life as forming her children in a certain way until they are "more rational people."

Lauren's teenage son, Scott Thompson, educated in public school until high school, understands homeschooling as forging a temporary private space that may cultivate an independent thinking apart from the influence of peers:

> Well, the difference with homeschooling and public schooling[13] is that homeschooling ends. Like there's a time when, all of a sudden, you're not homeschooled, when you know other things also. So homeschooling is

[11] All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.

[12] *Unschooling* denotes a specific homeschooling approach rooted in the self-directed learning of the child. The educational environment is intentionally highly unstructured, allowing for the natural curiosity and interests of the child to guide the learning.

[13] Respondents' perceptions of "public school" come up frequently in the interview data. Perceptions, of course, do not always match reality. In some cases, these perceptions are based on actual experience in a public school – Scott, for instance, was in a public school until high school, some homeschooled students took one or two classes in the local public school, and many of the mothers we interviewed were former teachers in public schools. In other cases, however, the perceptions of public schools were not based on any actual experiences in public schools but based on hearsay or stereotypes. Of course, many homeschool critics also base their perceptions on hearsay or stereotypes. It seems to us that both sides could gain from some charity in their framing of the "other..Nevertheless, to reiterate a point made earlier in the paper, perceptions matter sociologically because they have a way of palpably structuring the parameters of social life and interactions.

> temporary. To a lot of people, it's preparing people and getting strong roots to survive the real world, even though a lot of them don't know what the real world is. So it's kind of difficult.
>
> But public schoolers will never get that experience. They're going to be in public school all their life. Not actually in school, but that's all they're getting is that feeling of everyone influencing you, getting torn apart by different people's influences, not knowing what to think.
>
> So I think that people who are homeschooled, it's going to be difficult for them while they're in school. But as soon as they get out of school, they're going to have a similar experience to what I had. And they're going to be able to see what other people can't.

What Scott points out is similar to many critics' concerns – homeschoolers are being prepared for a world in which they have little experience. Yet Scott contrasts this with the danger he sees for those who have known only conventional education; homeschooling is temporary, but, for Scott, conventionally schooled kids never leave "public school," always constrained to influences that leave them "not knowing what to think." For Scott, homeschooling may limit a certain exposure to the "real world" temporarily, but it is for the sake of contributing to that world later on by being able to think, or "to see what other people can't."

What is it that homeschoolers see that others may miss? Scott's perception that many homeschoolers understand their education as developing "roots to survive the real world" raises questions about what they see in that "real world" and in the influence of peers that calls for keeping their children sheltered. For Simran, a similar concern as Scott's takes on new language; the shelter of the home opens up a different world, one that is relegated by what she perceives as the consumeristic and competitive impulses of the world of peer influence:

> At public school, my son would be only focused on what everybody is wearing that day, who's dating who, who your teacher is for math.… The world is not at all the way public school is. To me, it's completely different … when they come home, I feel like their horizons are broadened.
>
> My kids want to talk about real things, you know? Things that really matter, and not who's wearing what.

Consumerism and conformity, which Simran sees reflected in conventional education, are marks of a "mass society" that has worried many social theorists in the 20th century, including Hannah Arendt. This perceived social conformism and its preoccupation with material concerns means that "what everybody is wearing" and "who's dating who" become our common speech, over and above the world that Simran sees, the one of "real things" These are the "small and vulgar pleasures" that Tocqueville (2002) worried would corrupt the democratic soul (p. 663).

Our interview with Annie Donald, a non-religious unschooling mom, also shows a resistance to materialistic conformity:

> I think you need to be able to find a place, not the whole material values thing, you know, the whole, "We have to wear the right thing. You've got to wear the UGGs. You've got to have the iPhone. You've got to have your hair this way to go to school." We have none of that. It's just it's not an issue. We've taught them that all that is really bunk, and we have an opportunity to not be involved with that.

Interviewer: And do you think homeschooling sort of helps with that message?
Annie: Absolutely.
Interviewer: Because?
Annie: There isn't the peer pressure.

Like Lauren (above), who sees homeschooling as an opportunity to create a space outside the influences of peer culture and dominant pedagogies that, to her, counter the ability to think well, Annie sees homeschooling as providing "a place" that, in its private space, allows her children to see beyond "material values."

The examples above show one way that homeschooling families might envision a private voice: they see the home, as space set apart from peer influences, as the best place to prepare their children for future participation in a pluralistic world. That world requires a form of independent, critical thinking that is not served by conformity to peer culture and its consumeristic patterns. Because many homeschooling families perceive a strong force of social conformism in conventional school, they see homeschooling as paradoxically affording more opportunities than conventional schooling to work towards pluralism. These families offer direct critiques of the assumption that conventional schooling makes space for the ideals of diversity and equality we associate with democratic political life and, in so doing, act politically though they distance themselves from a perceived "public." Although they admit to certain limited experiences, these families suggest that their children have more direct exposure to the kind of plural world necessary for late-modern political life than others who are subjected to a "child's world" of conformity and consumerism (see note 20).

Julie Scott, a nonreligious unschooling mom and education professor at a nearby public university, wants her children to grow and develop however they see fit, but is clear that she's pushing *against* the individualistic, consumerist, and competitive moral orientations she associates with conventional schools:

> But because they get to hang out with all these other kids of other ages, I don't see anybody who is so individualistic. Also, they're less materialistic. I think because when you go to school, it's a competition. It's a constant competition. Every single day, every single minute you're competing on something … whether you want to or not.
>
> And homeschoolers are not. It's not a competition. Nothing is a competition. How you learn is not a competition. What you look like is not a competition. What kind of clothes you wear. It all becomes so irrelevant, or, if anything, it's almost like pushing, "How can you be different?" So, I don't want to be like everybody else.

Julie notes that part of the beauty of homeschooling is the unique opportunity for age integration, which moves students to see the world from other perspectives, learning to care for people with different needs and strengths than their own:

> I think that they actually get to interact with all kinds – we talk about diversity. They get to interact with really diverse people. People who are 3 years old are very different from 18 years old, right, or 83 years old. So these kids, they get to interact with people who are really, really different on every level, and [learn] how to respect a baby, how to respect an old person who doesn't know what they're saying anymore. So you get to spend time being with people who are dramatically different.
>
> When I say diversity, I mean every kind of diversity. It's not like you just happen to lump some people together who happen to be different skin colors which is not all that meaningful. People who are actually, culturally different.

Julie's articulation of diversity may raise further questions. But her desire for "every kind of diversity" is far from the age segregation of conventional schooling that she sees as placing limits on the "dramatic difference" even one generation can bring. She sees conventional schools as far from the ideal, "So our schools are – I think, typically, they're much more like fascist dictatorships than they are democracies. There's nothing democratic about a typical school; students, of course, *have no voice*" (emphasis added). Julie goes on to paraphrase John Taylor Gatto, one of the leading thinkers of the "unschooling" movement, who says (in Julie's words): "school teaches children to envy those who are older and have contempt for those that are younger." Homeschooling, in her eyes, avoids both. For Julie, though homeschoolers are criticized for not being "socialized," it is "really hard to overcome *that* kind of socialization if you're schooled."

Liza Davidson, a nonreligious unschooling mom and former elementary school teacher in California, puts "thinking" in direct contrast to such aspects of consumerism and conformity that she sees reflected in conventional schools:

> [My kids are] independent thinkers. They don't need a posse going with them to do things like so many of the public school girls that I see. I can remember, this was probably eight years ago, our local paper had the homecoming queens in the paper. And they all had straight, blonde hair. And I asked [our daughter], "Are there no brunettes or curly-haired or short-haired girls at that school?" Because they take on groupthink. And our girls do not have groupthink. And to me, that's what a lot of people want to criticize, I think it can be one of the great benefits of homeschooling.

At the same time that Liza emphasizes her children as "independent thinkers," she recognizes that they have been formed against the mainstream. Her kids may be independent of peers, but at the cost of being dependent upon parents. In resisting peer conformity homeschoolers may strengthen parental conformity, so that one conformity is traded for another. But Liza sees such formation as temporary and enabling an unexpected kind of independence:

> [Now] that [our daughter] is working and is in the workforce and everything, she's working with people that don't hold our views. And I think that's good for her. But I don't think that would have been good for her at 5 years old. She needed to have that confidence of who she was first. And people would argue, "Well, you made her what she is." And, yeah, guilty as charged. But then also, she's not finished yet …
>
> I just wanted her to have that foundation. And for me personally, one of the benefits that I see of homeschooling that I did not anticipate seeing whenever we started was both of our girls are independent.

Liza's recognition and acceptance of her role in the formation of her children enables her to see the formation, or lack of it, which occurs in conventional education towards what she sees as "groupthink." Understanding her own influence on her daughter's formation and her responsibility to hand down a story, to "make her what she is," means, for Liza, her daughter's freedom to be "not finished yet."

Marley Preston is a 17-year-old homeschooled student from an Evangelical Protestant family. Marley sees conventionally educated peers as focused on material and social life and knows she is expected to take on a divergent narrative. Marley describes an encounter with her friend and neighbor who holds different views on sex, and how she sees homeschooling as providing "the choice" to think outside of the narrative provided by her friend's school and peers:

> My one friend got a boyfriend last year right before prom … they had only been dating for like a week or something, and she was already thinking about sleeping with him, and I thought that was really weird because she didn't even know him that well. And she was like, "Yeah, well, I mean, it's just what you do."
>
> … [In public school,] because you're surrounded by it all the time, it's like desensitizing…. It's considered normal. And it's something that they are just pushing on us as the world. [In a public school] health class, am I going to learn about being abstinent before I'm married? Am I going to learn that I have purpose and that I was created? Or am I going to learn that, "Well, as long as you are being protective and safe about it, it's totally fine. Because there's no emotional or chemical connection. And whatever happens is whatever happens. And this is what people do now, so just get over it."
>
> And I think you don't have that choice. And since – if I were to be placed in that setting … it would be very hard for me to stay where I am now, with my opinions and my worldviews, because you're constantly having it shoved down your throat – like this is presented as normal.

The "normal" presentation of sex by conventional schools is probably more or less accurate than Marley describes. Regardless, what Marley reminds us of is that the "neutral" understanding of sex in society opposes the worldview passed down by her family and her religion, a worldview that she sees as providing an opportunity to think differently than the majority of her peers, to reflect on something like the meaning of sex within the larger context of the story she's been given.

Preserving a child from a perceived public life for the sake of a politically diverse future, or pulling a child away from the influences of consumerism, materialism, and conformity – these, along with other motivations, may be ways homeschooling families are attempting to re-

establish difference as vital to American life. And many families see such difference as uniquely linked to their child's ability to think independently.

In this way, many parents see re-establishing uniqueness as central to an ability to think for oneself. Kerri Stevens, a Protestant, African American homeschooling mom and former law enforcement officer writes of the freedom she sees among students in her daughter's co-op group to be "whoever they are":

> Oh, what tickles me is just that they are around these kids that are so different than what I would say normal kids would be or what kids were like when I was younger. They are creative. They're okay with whoever they are. They wear their hair crazy. My son has his hair crazy now. They are into the theater and acting, and talking about topics, science and arts.
>
> And my kids are blooming in that type of environment. They don't feel like they have to stifle some of their natural tendencies. They're in theater. They're acting in the plays. And they are singing show tunes and just doing these really carefree, wacky, but not really what you would see in society as being cool.
>
> So it just always tickles me. I think that's a sign of diversity. That's a sign of free-thinking and being out of the box.

Kerri sees the opportunities the co-op has provided as what nurtures the development of "free thinking" in her children, recognizing that the array of interests that would be less acceptable in conventional schools may encourage a certain kind of diversity in homeschooling.

In a similar way, Martha Billings, an Evangelical Protestant homeschooling student, imagines a different life had she been educated in conventional school:

> I probably would be like in cliques and trying to hang out with different friends and change myself to fit with them. Being on my own in homeschooling, I get to be my own person. I can think for myself, too. We did a lot of different studies – like theology stuff. I get to learn different religions, and understand why Christianity is understandable for me, at least.

Martha's desire to "be her own person" seems like a cliché statement characteristic of most American teenagers. But to her, this seems a real possibility, even an accomplishment, through homeschooling and her opportunities to explore religion. Like Kerri's children, Martha sees her distinct identity as enabled by pursuing studies she would have had limited opportunity to otherwise, and as related to her ability to "think for herself" and understand her own religion in relation to others.

Scott Thompson, the student who earlier spoke of homeschooling as providing conditions that enabled him "to see what other people can't," speaks about the influence of peers and teachers during his time in conventional school as compared to his homeschooling co-op group:

> I just, I was always around a lot of influences and I was forced to agree with one. And then, I came here and there were practically no influences. And I realized how good it felt to think for myself. But also how isolating it was and how the one influence that we had was considerably more powerful. Like it's all about who is influencing you and in what way and how powerfully.
>
> Seeing other people at my schools who have only ever felt one or the other, seeing at this [co-op] how people have only ever felt one, and then looking back and seeing how people who have only ever felt the other one [at public school], it's different feeling. Like I can never belong to any of those groups anymore because to be what I was or what I was not before, it feels like I would be lowering myself. I don't know. I feel like I've kind of elevated my intellect by seeing this spectrum.

Although Scott undoubtedly overstates in the beginning, saying there are "practically no influences" in homeschooling, he does seem to recognize that homeschoolers, like their conventionally schooled peers, are subject to the formative influences of those around them. With this in mind, what do homeschoolers mean when they stress an ability to "think for themselves," to "think freely," or "think critically"? Scott's own "different feeling" of an "elevated intellect," his way of seeing "what other people can't," is at the heart of his understanding of what it means to think.

The families we interviewed fell on a continuum from progressive unschoolers to more traditional and conservative religious homeschoolers.[14] We found a repeated claim from families across this spectrum that homeschooled students could "think for themselves," often contrasted with perceived conventionally schooled peers. At a surface level, these expressions are not unique to homeschooling parents, as many late-modern American parents articulate a desire for their children to "think for themselves," often meaning, "I want my children to think *like me*."[15]

Yet, as noted earlier, one of the largest criticisms of homeschooling is that it is in opposition to free thought that parents pull their children from conventional schooling and educate them in closed networks, where they can receive similar messages from other adults and peers about what is right to think and what is wrong to think. As noted above, our interviews point to some truth in this: one of the traits that stands out among the diverse motivations among homeschooling parents is the opportunity to form their children in a certain way, a way that families see as in opposition to most conventional schooling. It is possible that homeschoolers are trading one kind of perceived conformity for another kind of conformity: homeschooling parents resist the conformity of the public school so that they may conform their children to their own ideals. Perhaps some degree of conformity in education is inescapable, simply because of the inherent socializing role of education itself.[16]

And yet, in their opposition to the perceived conformity of conventional schooling, there remains a stronger link among the families in our study than what first appears: they are united by a negative narrative across the diverse spectrum of motivations, from unschoolers to religious homeschoolers. That negative narrative is not rooted in opposition to the school's contested "diverse" nature, but rather in opposition to a perceived lack of diversity, or lack of tolerance for it. Such a narrative, when placing itself in opposition to the perceived dominance of mass conformity, offers more than an unreflective exit from the public good of education. It offers a "private voice" of reflexive thinking, one that may contribute to a larger political narrative of democracy that relies on diversity and critical thought. For in their various ways of understanding diversity and plurality,[17] homeschoolers may be cultivating patterns of reflexive thinking that offer important contributions to a robust democratic life rather than a dangerous withdrawal from it.

Hannah Arendt and the politics of plurality

On thinking

For homeschooling critics, the threat of indoctrination stems from a home environment that cultivates hostile content and worldviews (Ross, 2010), combined with limited exposure to "public knowledge" (Curren & Blokhuis, 2011, p. 7). In a radical claim, however, political theorist Hannah Arendt (1994[1954]b) writes that the underlying danger of "indoctrination" is not that it provides misinformed knowledge or facts about the world, but that it threatens the very ability to *think* about that world (pp. 308–309). Indoctrination, in this way, inhibits our potential to comprehend how a political world comes into being, threatening what is essential to its continuation: the plurality that

[14]The literature on homeschooling generally divides the population into two groups. Van Galen (1991) labels them "ideologues" (Christian fundamentalists who object to what the public schools teach and want to pass on their conservative political and religious beliefs to their children) and "pedagogues" (people who believe that children learn more naturally apart from formal schooling, and desire to grow children's innate curiosity and creativity). Stevens (2001) uses the labels "believers" and "inclusives" to describe roughly the same groups, and Gaither (2008) calls them "closed communion" and "open communion." Although the dichotomous categories are helpful descriptive tools, families do not always fit into discrete groups. Respondents in our sample roughly fall on a continuum between these two groups. The important point here, however, is that the activity of thinking seems shared by families across the continuum.

[15]This seems to be a broader phenomenon among late-modern American parents (See Dill, 2015).

[16]In Durkheim's (1972) words: "Education is thus simply the means by which a society prepares, in its children, the essential conditions of its own existence" (p. 203).

[17]As we saw in Julie's description of diversity, homeschooling families often articulate broader definitions of diversity than race, ethnicity, or income alone. Many see diversity as including a range of age, ideas, interests, ability or disability, and learning style. This expanded understanding of diversity could be a place for a further critique, however: by seeing each individual person as unique, the pressing concerns of inequality and injustice to groups in education could be underplayed.

constitutes and renews it (Arendt, 2005, p. 128; 1958, p. 7). The danger of indoctrination lies in its antipolitical effect: thoughtless conformity.

Arendt's articulation of this danger, and the need for a revival of "thinking" as its counter-influence, may be traced to the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, the German Nazi organizer, in Jerusalem.[18] Arendt's (1978) perception of Eichmann was of an absence of thought and imaginative narrative: "there was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions" (p. 4). Her concern was what evil might occur if a similar "absence of thinking" as that which she observed in Eichmann were to infect democracy through conformism. The danger of conformism lies in it being glanced over by our horror at the visible propaganda of totalitarian regimes we have experience with; conformity, like banality, if not recognized and named as a legitimate threat, very well may sneak its way in and open the door towards an unnoticed yet equally frightening totalitarianism (Arendt, 1994[1954]a, p. 426).

Arendt (1978) describes thinking as that "soundless" conversation that occurs in private, between "me and myself," where we reflect on some object, person, deed, or idea, provoking a process where we become reflexive and question the self (p. 184). When we think, we go through a "questioning and answering process … whereby we constantly raise the basic Socratic question: What do you *mean* when you say … ?" (Arendt, 1978, p. 185). Thinking is a dialogue that seeks the meaning of things, establishing us as question-asking beings that have the power to construct narrative judgements about the worlds we live in.[19]

Although thinking is a private activity, it is communal in that it strives to tell about a world and comes first from the outside, as we learn language and learn to converse with others: "I first talk with others before I talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that I can conduct a dialogue not only with others but with myself as well" (Arendt, 1978, p. 189). Throughout our life, thinking often begins or continues because of another person. And, for Arendt (1978), the dialogue itself can be conducted with a friend, who is, infamously, like "another self" (p. 200).

But thinking's communal aspects cannot blur its role in developing the individual conscience as a source for reflection and self-criticism. It is this critical mark of thinking that distinguishes it from mere consciousness, which Arendt (1978) recognizes is likely a capability we share with higher animals (p. 36). Thinking, rather, is a uniquely human activity, as it is one of the first conscious experiences of difference we have (p. 185). As we think and dialogue with ourselves, we begin to understand the distinction, the nuance, and the subtlety between me and the other, between her thoughts and mine. It makes me reflective, self-critical, and self-aware.

Arendt's observations of Eichmann suggest that she believed he did not engage in this process of understanding, of thinking, at all. Unable to see plurality, he thoughtlessly conformed. In a time marked by a clashing of narratives, ideology, and traditions, Arendt saw a real danger in the conformity of thought itself, one that could sneak in, undercover as it were, provoking us to lose our desire towards "internal conversation," to relating, differentiating, and wrestling with our experience of plurality and our understanding of the world. Indoctrination, in the sense of conformity of thought, could occur just as easily in public as it could in private. For those who "run away from themselves," as Aristotle (2002) put it, seek the crowd, for "when they are with others they forget" (IX.1166). If Arendt is right, it is because at the same time the physical world

[18]Arendt's infamous phrase arising from the encounter – "the banality of evil" – remains highly controversial, as does her description of the trial. See Stangneth (2015) for a recent contribution.

[19]"Reality is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable. Who 'says what is' always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning … The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment … " (Arendt, 1961, pp. 261–262). As a note, one of Arendt's most perplexing concepts is her notion of "judgement," which we have intentionally left out of the major content of this paper for two reasons. Primarily, we have no authoritative text from her on the subject. In addition, in other works where she does pick up the notion of judgement in relation to education (1959, 1961), it is often to show that thinking precedes judgement and that it and requires a certain amount of life experience.

moves towards greater diversity, we are retreating from difference in the critical field of our thought world.

Our aim here and below is to show that the concern that homeschooling necessarily tends towards a "hostility to difference," an intolerance or indoctrination (Ross, 2010, p. 1005), is misguided, at least for some homeschoolers. Using Arendt's conception of the thinking activity as something that is uniquely private and yet a necessary condition of political action, we argue that homeschooling can provide a standpoint from which some families cultivate this reflexive thinking and challenge what they see as dominate conformity. Ironically, homeschooling could have the ability to free children from the very indoctrination its critics fear.

"The social"

At the heart of Arendt's interest in thinking and its critical stance is her concern over the rise of a new sphere, one more or less theorized by a number of twentieth century thinkers: "the social." Like totalitarianism, the danger of this social sphere is its resulting conformism and accompanying indoctrination that threatens our ability to make sense, or find meaning, in individual distinction. Many of the homeschoolers we interviewed are united in their critical opposition to conventional education because they see conformity and consumerism – two of the "effects" of something like Arendt's social – as deeply embedded in conventional schooling.

In their withdrawal to private but political life, homeschoolers' critiques offer additional clarity to Arendt's theory of the social. Arendt's development of this concept, and its concomitant forms as mass society, totalitarianism, and the nation-state, begins with the blurring of distinction between premodern public and private spaces as articulated in Greek and Roman thought. For Arendt, the social sphere is one that emerges as the private life of the household and its material necessities rise and take on qualities of the public interests of the market, ultimately manifesting itself as mass consumption and lack of distinction.

Eventually, private space and public space collapse into each other, fading away as the social rises. Arendt sees the erasure of both spaces as the real tragedy of the modern age, because, as a result, we are deprived of distinctly political experiences that are grounded in plurality. Arendt (1958) writes:

> [Men] have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective. (p. 58)

In other words, the threat of the social is a stultifying sameness. The real danger, for Arendt, is the possible loss of plurality, which is the loss of distinction and difference, of individuality, and ultimately a loss of what it means to be human. Plurality, for Arendt (1958), is the human condition upon which political life in general – not just democracies – is built (p. 7). Without plurality, we lose what Arendt called "natality," the ability to make the old "new," as human generations and civilizations always do. Without the plurality that enables us to remake the world, we abandon the common world to fade along with the past. Counterintuitive as it is, Arendt suggests that if we lose our differences, we have lost our commonality.

The stultifying sameness of the social means that "the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, 'tranquilized,' functional type of behavior" (Arendt, 1958, p. 322). This "tranquilized" behavior that destroys distinction is at the heart of the threat of a new social mind-set. Arendt writes that the danger of tyrannies and mass society is that threat to human freedom exhibited in the destruction of plurality in common life. But the source of such a threat doesn't limit itself to what we first think of as "political" – it reaches into the innermost processes of the human mind and threatens our ability "to think what we are doing"

(Arendt, 1958, p. 5). In other words, the social's destruction of plurality and human distinctness pushes its way into our very thought process.

Political education?

As noted above, many of the homeschoolers we interviewed raise concerns over the conformity of a peer-segregated "child's world"[20] they perceive in conventional schooling. This concern spills over from a rejection that every child should think and act alike into more specific rejections of consumerism and its push for the primacy of material life. Many homeschooling families in our sample react to such perceptions of conventional schooling in two ways. Homeschooling mothers like Kerri Stevens and Simran Berner see their private educational choice as enabling them to help create, in their homes and co-ops, an alternative common world to their perceptions of the dominant narratives of conformity and consumerism in conventional schools. Other families, like the Thompsons or Marley Preston, saw the home as a place of preparation for future participation in diverse common world.

The nature of a developing pluralism means that we all tend to be confused about the "real" world, its political constitution, boundaries, and renewal. What some homeschoolers offer is a vision that there are worlds outside of what they see as the dominant one of conformity and consumerism, and that such worlds can be reflexively narrated. For these families, conventional schooling represents not a diverse common world, but something like Arendt's "social" in its destruction of the boundary between private and public life – by allowing the relationships between children and their peers to become, in Arendt's (1961) words, "a kind of public life" where children are "forced to expose themselves to the light of a public existence" while they are yet "beings in process of becoming" (p. 187). In Simran's (above) eyes, the danger of conventional education becomes the influence, or authority, of "the group" over the parents and even over the teacher; in Arendt's (1961) words, "the authority of a group, even a child group, is always considerably stronger and more tyrannical than the severest authority of an individual person can ever be" (p. 178). What Simran sees is the negative influence of peers; what Arendt sees is priming for the largest, and most subtle, threat to democracy – the tyranny of the majority.[21]

Although Arendt (1959) argues that public existence is crucial to a flourishing human life, for children this kind of public influence becomes an altogether different experience as they are naturally conforming:

> man is never so much of a conformer … as in childhood. The reason is that every child instinctively seeks authorities to guide it into the world in which he is still a stranger, in which he cannot orient himself by his own judgment. (p. 55)

When that authority has been replaced by a child's world, as Arendt argues occurs in modern American education, what danger remains is a very "political" kind of education, but one that, quite apart from a politics of plurality, is concerned with conformity.

For Arendt (1961), as children grow they begin to develop that "uniqueness that distinguishes every human being from every other, the quality by virtue of which he is not only a stranger in the world but something that has never been here before" (p. 189). The socialization process, rightly understood, weaves the rich tapestry of plurality. The concern of many critics of homeschooling is

[20]Arendt (1961) writes that one of the assumptions of modern education is "that there exists a child's world and a society formed among children that are autonomous and must insofar as possible be left to them to govern. Adults are only there to help with this government. The authority that tells the individual child what to do and what not to do rests with the child group itself … it takes into account only the group and not the individual child" (p. 181).

[21]This reveals a further irony in the contemporary homeschooling movement: it is made possible only because of modern individualism (see Stevens, 2001 for more on homeschooling and individualism). That is, their resistance to conformity (what we are calling their political action) is built upon assumptions of individualism rooted in modern liberalism. But the irony works both ways – the rise of Arendt's "social" sphere of conformity is a uniquely modern phenomenon, which draws on an original point from Tocqueville that individualism and collectivism arise together in modernity.

that in its private nature it does not allow for this plurality; we acknowledge that this is certainly possible. But our interviews suggest that many homeschoolers think conventional schools do not socialize for plurality, and that the private space of the home can.

In view of something like Arendt's "social" emerging in late-modern life, many homeschooling parents see the hidden threat to plurality as in the prevention of the new that each child brings into the world as representatives of their distinct communities, families, and selves. For these homeschoolers, the conformity of the social sphere prohibits the thinking required for both natality and plurality. In other words, these families see that without protecting difference at home, without honoring the private voice, we threaten the opportunity for such difference to be reflected in common life.

Conclusion

As Arendt (1994[1954]b) reflected on the tragedies and perplexities of her time, she reminds us that in the "dark times" of totalitarianism things that once were not political, such as private life, become political statements of their own. Totalitarianism threatens the meaning humans make of their lives and the "new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won" (p. 310). Against such threats posed by totalitarianism and conformism, Arendt (1978) turned to the private activity of "thinking" as a political statement by default, one that could help awaken the political imagination necessary for a diverse common life (p. 192).[22] If Arendt is correct that conformity will be one of the greatest political threats to the American democratic experiment, homeschoolers, in their withdrawal, become political by implication. In late-modern American culture, simple resistance to mass conformity is itself a contribution to a public good, and this kind of "thinking" can be cultivated in what we often think of as private spaces.

Insofar as homeschooling serves as an environment that encourages reflexive thinking, it may contribute to democratic diversity in ways not yet perceived. Homeschooling may not sustain the ideals of political education in the same way as did the "common school," but it may still offer an important political contribution in its own right.[23] Its cultivation of a "private voice" can offer a radical political critique – one that, in practice, may help us reimagine civil co-operation outside of the bounds of the nation-state.

It is important to acknowledge that our interview sample is not representative of all homeschoolers, and our argument is not that all homeschoolers cultivate the kind of thinking that Arendt believed to be essential for late-modern democratic citizenship. Nor does our limited argument imply that public schools necessarily force an unthinking conformity on their students. Not only do we believe public schools can provide fertile ground for thinking, we believe they must do so in our time. How common this perspective on thinking is – or whether homeschooled students then engage in public life by some other measure – are separate questions. But if the picture homeschooling critics offer – one of withdrawal and indoctrination – was complete, the homeschoolers in our sample would not have truly political arguments for what they are creating in private life. Rather, as we have attempted to show by relying on Arendt's terms, many

[22]"In such emergencies," Arendt (1978) writes, "it turns out that the purging component of thinking … is political by implication" (p. 192).

[23]Some families were explicitly involved in state political activities as well, often through organizations such as Generation Joshua, the civic education arm of the conservative Homeschool Legal Defense Association. In some cases, grassroots Generation Joshua chapters would volunteer in political campaigns of candidates who support homeschool causes, and these candidates were almost exclusively Republican or conservative Independents. One of our student respondents, Martha Billings, led her local Generation Joshua chapter, which sponsored debates between both candidates in local elections. She saw her role as educating community members so they could be informed voters: "I'd rather have an informed turnout than a large one. Most people who come in, they are not informed. They say they wanna vote for the person but they have no idea who the person is." A successful meeting, for Martha, "means like grassroots, like people are like actually engaged and are actually interested in this, and not just going for like the free food or whatever."

homeschoolers do have such arguments. Contra critics of homeschooling that see it as political exit and antidemocratic, we argue that providing space for thinking is a political move in itself, a private voice for the sake of a common story.

What homeschoolers show us, united by a negative narrative that opposes what they perceive as social conformism, is that it is possible to make a political move by forging a space within which we may learn to think. Such an exit is not necessarily opposed to a democratic voice, as Lubienski (2000) suggests, but may instead make possible a private voice of reflexive thinking that resists social conformity. We do not suggest that homeschooling necessarily does this, but rather that it can provide fertile ground for thinking, and that it is a productive political action inasmuch as it does so. At the very least, the withdrawal of homeschoolers stands as more than an impotent political exit – it reminds us to question whether a public space can flourish without a proper private one, whether the diversity of citizens' voices will be heard in our explicitly "political" affairs if we do not first recognize the democratically robust possibility of a private voice.

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