

How to Believe in Free Speech

Almost all libertarians earnestly say, “I believe in free speech.” Normally, though, this goes way beyond the *right* to speak freely. Most libertarians also believe that free speech “works” in some sense – that given a free exchange of ideas, the truth will at least ultimately prevail.

On reflection, this is an awkward position. Western countries don’t have completely free speech, but they are amazingly close to this extreme. Furthermore, the anonymity of the internet makes it easy to evade most of the lingering restrictions on free expression. And yet, as you may have noticed, libertarianism has failed to become popular.

Which raises an awkward question: If free speech yields truth, then shouldn’t we infer that unpopular viewpoints such as libertarianism are simply wrong?

You could heavily lean on the caveat that free speech *ultimately* yields truth. But modern libertarianism has existed for over half a century. Its popularity probably peaked either just before September 11, 2001 – or perhaps just before the 2008 financial crisis. Both of these peaks were modest at best. If that’s what ultimate victory looks like, ultimate victory is a small consolation.

Non-libertarians will naturally be tempted to infer that libertarianism is false. But since *no* political philosophy has achieved decisive intellectual victory, that’s playing with fire. Perhaps staunch moderates could claim victory for every view that 80-90% of people accept, from Social Security to the War on Terror. But staunch moderates are now so rare that it’s not even clear if they outnumber libertarians.

At this point, it’s tempting to backpedal. When we say “free speech works,” why assume that works means “ultimately leads to truth”? People supply and demand ideas for many many reasons. The desire to produce or consume truth is one motive. But people also care about entertainment, tradition, fads, and much more. Books and movies officially labeled “fiction” normally outsell books and movies officially labeled “non-fiction.” So it would hardly be surprising if people preferred to heavily adulterate their descriptive beliefs with drama and wishful thinking.

If you backpedal this much, however, can you retain much enthusiasm for free speech? Yes. While free speech doesn’t lead to the victory of truth, at least it *allows* the search for truth to continue. As long as you have a large, diverse society, you’re likely to have a rationalist subculture – or at least a bunch of subject-specific rationalist subcultures. Free speech allows these truth-seekers to ask thoughtful questions and propose reasonable answers, even if the thoughtful questions are awkward and the reasonable answers are

scary. While the rationalists are likely to remain the minority, free speech preserves their existence. And since the methods and fruits of rationalism appeal to the smart and curious, free speech allows rationalists to continuously skim off the cognitive cream of society. Free speech doesn't make truth popular, but it does rescue the elect from abject error.

Thus, I can't honestly give three cheers to free speech, I can give it two. The first cheer for free speech is deontological: People have a right to express themselves freely, even if their expression is erroneous or irrational. The second cheer for free speech is elitist: Free speech lets the best and brightest produce and consume truth, even if most people hold the truth in disdain. But we can't honestly give free speech a third cheer for making truth popular - because the claim that free speech makes truth popular simply isn't true.

And thanks to free speech, I'm free to say so!