

Free Staters seek to undo New Hampshire government from within

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 3, 2022, 1:11 p.m.



Carla Gericke, former president and current board member of the Free State Project, records podcasts at her home in Manchester. "I want to take a swing at making one place better, and this is the place I picked," she said of New Hampshire. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

MANCHESTER, N.H. — The doormat outside Carla Gericke's house carries the warning "Come back with a warrant." It's a stark reflection of her broad distrust of government bureaucracy, an attitude that is the driving force behind the Free State movement, which has led thousands of like-minded people to move to New Hampshire on a quixotic quest — to build a libertarian utopia.

Gericke helps lead that movement, and her agenda is broad and unapologetically radical. More than 6,000 people have relocated to New Hampshire since the effort was launched 21 years ago, according to its organizers. And while some dispute that claim, legislators on both sides of the aisle in Concord agree that Free Staters have come to wield outside political influence.

Inside her home, Gericke explained why an independent New Hampshire is a good idea, why its public schools are hopelessly broken, why Washington, D.C., is pervasively corrupt, and why Free Staters who believe big government is the enemy of personal freedom are determined to turn society upside down.

“I’m a problem-solver, I’m a solutionist, I am an innovator, I’m a visionary,” said Gericke, a former corporate attorney who moved to New Hampshire from New York in 2008 as part of the Free State movement. “I want to take a swing at making one place better, and this is the place I picked.”

But where Gericke and other “porcupines” — a nickname Free Staters have adopted — see a blueprint for shrinking government and protecting the rights to privacy and private property, critics see a back-door assault on democracy itself.

Their end game, detractors say, is to infiltrate New Hampshire government at all levels — from select boards to the State House — with the aim of dismantling it. State support for public schools is a priority target.

“Their whole mission is to take over state government and to use the threat of secession as leverage” against the federal government, said Zandra Rice Hawkins, executive director of Granite State Progress, a progressive advocacy group.

Jeremy Kauffman, a Free State Project board member, describes democracy itself as a threat.

“Democracy is a soft form of communism that basically assures bad and dangerous

people will be in power," Kauffman said by e-mail. The Manchester resident, a tech entrepreneur, is running for US Senate as a Libertarian.

The movement began with a 2001 essay by Jason Sorens, then a Yale graduate student and now director of the Center for Ethics in Society at St. Anselm College in Manchester. The goal was at once simple and sweeping: attract 20,000 libertarians to a single state with a small population, get elected to public office, concentrate power, and enact change from the inside out.

In 2003, Free Staters chose New Hampshire, with its deep vein of conservatism and "Live Free or Die" motto, as their prospective homeland, and more than 19,000 people have since signed a pledge to move to the state, organizers said. Only a third of that number are estimated to have relocated so far, but Sorens said they have made a major impact.

"There's been the emergence of a significant group of libertarian legislators, and some of them are in leadership" in Concord, the state capital, Sorens said. "I've been pleased overall with what we've achieved. I may have hoped that we would reach 20,000, but I'm not sure I ever expected we would."

House majority leader Jason Osborne, for example, moved to New Hampshire from Ohio in 2010 as part of the Free State Project. Like many Free Staters, Osborne belongs to the Republican Party, something critics say masks the true intentions of many in the movement — using a major party as a Trojan horse to gain election.

Sorens estimated that as many as 40 percent of Free Staters favor secession.

The porcupines, so called because they portray themselves as harmless until provoked, have built a statewide support network for newcomers and member families already here.

Porcupine real-estate agents help find housing for the arrivals, others steer them to jobs, and weekly meetups, from pub gatherings to knitting circles, have sprung up across the

state. The Free State Project also organizes PorcFest each summer, a weeklong celebration featuring a plethora of lectures and family activities.

In the recent past, “those not so misguided by the winning government’s indoctrination camps” have heard about the War for Southern Independence, according to a PorcFest schedule. That’s the epic, bloody conflict better known as the Civil War. Parents also have been invited to a discussion on the “Battle Over Raising Your Child.”

“Your rulers would like to do you the ‘favor’ of taking your children off your hands to ‘educate’ them (with a heavy dose of learning to revere their authority),” its summary read.

While the group often avoids the spotlight, it gained notoriety this year when a Free State legislator sponsored a bill seeking a constitutional amendment to allow New Hampshire to secede. The effort was resoundingly defeated.

Free Stater influence also played a role in the controversial [two-week shutdown](#) of the Gunstock ski resort, a popular recreational area in conservative Belknap County. Antigovernment activists briefly took control of the commission that runs the county-owned attraction; chaos ensued.

And a Free Stater who served as select board chair in rural Croydon succeeded in cutting that town’s school budget in half with a startling motion at a sparsely attended town meeting. When they learned what had happened, hundreds of voters rallied to restore the funding.

Despite those setbacks, Free Staters have amassed substantial political clout, observers said.

Only 25 lawmakers in the 400-member House have been identified as known or likely Free Staters, but many more are believed to be aligned with the movement, according to Granite State Progress.

"They now control essentially the Republican Party in the House," Dr. Tom Sherman, a Democratic state senator from Rye who is running for governor, said at a picnic in Croydon, where families celebrated the restoration of school funding. "They're vocal and well-funded. It's the tail wagging the dog, and the tail is big enough."

When they enter the chamber, legislators are handed sheets with voting recommendations by the New Hampshire Liberty Alliance, a group that shares many of the Free State values, and are later graded on the positions they take.

Republican lawmakers buck those priorities at their peril, particularly in primary races, said Representative Brodie Deshaies, a Wolfeboro Republican who has criticized the secession effort and what he calls a lack of transparency among Free Staters.

"Are they for you, are they going after you, or are they staying out of the race?" said Deshaies, who estimated that a majority of Republican legislators might be associated with the group.

"That's never really happened in this state. How are they going to utilize this power?" Deshaies said. "I never know where they're going, and I'm unsure if they even know."

Free State leaders, including Kauffman, said the group is a big tent whose members range from radicals to pragmatists. The unifying strand, Gericke said, "is the nonaggression principle, which is an ethical stance that says you cannot force people to do things against their will."

That made the government response to the pandemic a rallying point, she said, although New Hampshire's restrictions were less stringent than many federal and municipal mandates.

"A lot of people are just like, 'This response is not for us. We'd like to live in a community where, you know, people aren't forcing us to do things against our will,'" said Gericke, who is running for state representative as a Republican.

The Free State Project also has alarmed the New Hampshire Council of Churches, which expressed concern last month after Free Staters tweeted a list of Christian churches in the state that it considers “woke.”

The list singled out congregations that have expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community, condemned racism, and endorsed measures to curb COVID-19, among other things, according to New Hampshire Public Radio.

Governor Chris Sununu, a Republican seeking a fourth term, occasionally has tried to distance himself from the Free State bloc. But many Democrats say he has little choice but to work with them if Republicans are to maintain control of the Legislature.

Sununu did not respond to requests for comment.

Despite the unease that Free Staters have caused, Andrew Smith, a political science professor at the University of New Hampshire and director of the UNH Survey Center, said the movement’s influence might be overstated.

“They’re taking advantage of what other people don’t want to do,” Smith said. “This is kind of typical, small-town New Hampshire politics.”

But in a state already known for its libertarian leanings, Free Staters have helped drive a broad expansion of school choice, which critics often portray as a steppingstone to eliminating public schools; supported the right to carry firearms without a permit; and endorsed cutting business and property taxes, among other measures.

Free Staters also have supported the legalization of gay marriage and medical marijuana in New Hampshire, which Gericke cites as evidence that the movement can work with progressives on issues of personal freedom.

But some in the Free State effort appear less sanguine about working with others.

“The goal is to get anyone who is an authoritarian and get them out of any position of

power, ideally to get them out of the state,” Kauffman said in a November podcast posted by the Libertarian Institute.

“If they’re not going to adopt our positions, we want them out,” added Kauffman, who moved to the state from Philadelphia in 2015. “And if they’re certainly in any positions of power, our goal is to replace them.”

By e-mail, Kauffman defined an authoritarian as “someone who violates the principles of bodily autonomy and voluntary interaction. For example, an authoritarian might think it’s right to rob one neighbor to pay for the other neighbor’s college.”

Free Staters are rarely so explicit in public, critics say, often masking their extreme agenda by appearing to run as mainstream Republicans.

“The Free State Project is deliberately targeting unsuspecting small communities where they can outnumber the local voting population with people who are brought in to disrupt political outcomes,” said Mohammad Saleh of Keene, chair of the Cheshire County Democrats.

“Voters see an ‘R’ next to a name, and they don’t necessarily ask what their background is,” Saleh said. The Free Staters are “an antidemocratic organization, which unfortunately has hijacked the New Hampshire Republican Party,”

According to the New Hampshire Business Review, 195 of the House’s 213-member Republican caucus in the 2021 session received A or B grades from the Liberty Alliance, a coalition “working to increase individual freedom.”

Among the 177 Democrats, 18 received a D, 24 were graded F, and the remaining 135 were deemed a “constitutional threat,” meaning they were deemed by the alliance to be “unfaithful to their oath of office to uphold the New Hampshire Constitution and the principle of liberty.”

Kauffman, in the podcast interview, expressed a hope that as the Free State movement

gains strength, its opponents will see the writing on the wall and leave.

“My hope would be that you can simply make it unattractive enough that if you want there to be a giant welfare state, what are you doing here? Why did you come here?” Kauffman said.

“We’re shrinking the state here as much as we can with the influence we have, but ultimately we’ve got to get enough that we can actively take it federal and start really saying, ‘Hey, if you’re in New Hampshire, these things don’t apply,’ ” he said.

“That’s not going to happen next year,” Kauffman added. “I’d be surprised if it happened in the next five. But if the movement keeps accelerating, I think that it could happen within 10.”

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