# Self-interest as Public Good?

# Homeschooling and an Economy of Common Goods

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## Abstract

Critics argue that homeschooling can be a threat to liberal democracy because it represents a withdrawal around the private interests of the family and neglects the public good and the virtues required to sustain it. This paper draws upon the thinkers Alexis de Tocqueville, Hannah Arendt, and Alasdair MacIntyre, as well as empirical data from a study of 35 homeschool families in the United States, to question the assumptions of both critics and homeschoolers about such private/public distinctions and the cultivation of civic virtue. We question whether the self-interest of homeschoolers leads to the public good, or if their political move pushes us to reconsider the good of education altogether.

## Introduction

The population of homeschooled children in the United States has grown rapidly in the last 30 years: the National Center for Education Statistics estimated the figure at 1.77 million for 2012 (Redford et al., 2017),[1] while the nonprofit National Home Education Research Institute estimated it at over 2 million for 2010.[2] As the population grows, so do its critics. Some scholars argue that homeschooling is potentially dangerous for liberal democratic societies. Homeschooling cannot cultivate 'public' virtue, they suggest, precisely because it is 'private' in its orientation – it is focused on the self-interest of the family and its needs and wants, not the shared good of the public realm (Apple, 2000; Curren and Blokhuis, 2011; Dwyer, 2016; Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2005; Ross, 2010). Public schools, they argue, are better suited for cultivating public virtue because they create diverse environments and teach tolerance and understanding across differences.

Curren and Blockhuis argue that a 'common school' is essential for 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' (2011: 4). The authors describe U.S. public schools as providing a 'nonrepressive education' and suggest homeschooling creates 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 and denies children the benefit of the expertise and collective experience of a school community . . . exposing them to greater educational risk' (Curren and Blockhuis, 2001: 7-8). Similarly, Ross is concerned with the possibility of 'indoctrination,' or the limited

[1] See Redford et al. 2017: 5-6. The data in this 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.

[2] See Ray 2011.

content and worldview provided by homeschooling families, arguing 'the state can and should limit the ability of intolerant homeschoolers to inculcate hostility to difference in their children' (2005: 1005).

Lubienski critiques homeschooling on similar grounds, arguing that it is intrinsically against the 'common good' because it elevates 'private goods over public goods' (2000: 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' (2000: 211). For Lubienski, 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 (2000: 214). Homeschooling, Lubienski tells us, 'does not simply throw off balance the symbiosis between public and private interests in education. It throws it out' (2000: 215).

These criticisms are plausible: homeschooling does seem to withdraw around the private self-interest of the family, disengaging from the public goods of the local school. The question of whether homeschooling undermines liberal democracy (in the USA or elsewhere) appears to be a question that will continue to generate debate, especially if the population continues to grow. And while that question itself is not *only* an empirical question, the empirical questions seem quite significant given the substance of the critiques. What do homeschoolers themselves think about this 'private goods' vs 'public goods' framing of their educational choices?

*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.[3] 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.[4]

[3] 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

[4] 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 explore distinctive approaches to character and citizenship education across a variety of different school sectors: public and private, religious and secular, and homeschooling.' It then explained the homeschool component of the study like this:

'The project is committed to including the homeschool sector because it represents a growing educational community with important implications for the moral and civic development of students. Homeschoolers operate from a variety of motivating factors, and research suggests the homeschooling community has a keen interest in the formation of moral and civic sensibilities of its students. The project seeks to better understand these interests and how they contribute to distinct educational cultures.' Finally, it explained participation details like this: 'We are recruiting homeschool families with students ages 13-18 to participate in this study. A researcher will conduct personal interviews with parents and students (approximately 1 hour each) that will focus on their homeschool experiences and how these experiences have shaped the student's moral and civic outlooks. Participants are assured full confidentiality.'

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 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.

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 public concerns in homeschooling are more likely to select into a study such as ours. Families that are more isolated and consciously withdrawn from public interests are less likely to select into the study. 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. It is also important to note that our interview data do not offer evidence or 'proof' of homeschoolers' civic activities or their commitment to a public good. 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 their commitments beyond their own self-interests. In spite of the challenges and limits in the data, listening to and understanding the voices of homeschoolers is a critical step in addressing the larger questions homeschooling raises in liberal democratic societies.

## Self-interest

Annie Donald[5] is a non-religious unschooling[6] mom from a Mid-Atlantic state where she lives in a modest split-level home in a suburban neighborhood. Annie, whose spouse is a web designer, worked in marketing before shifting to part-time project jobs when she began homeschooling her two children. When asked to respond to a criticism of homeschooling that says it withdraws around private interests and ignores the public good of education, Annie seemed quite certain:

> *It's not an esoteric argument for me. This is the one shot my kids have at an education. The system is obviously broken. I don't think there is any argument on whether or not it's a working system or not. And I don't want to risk my kids' future on 'Maybe they'll get it together while they're in school.'*

It seems clear that Annie's 'self-interest', or her interest in her own children's education, is her first priority in her homeschool decision. When we pushed back on her response, we suggested that if a highly motivated homeschool mom like her were to become involved in the public school, perhaps she could impact the 'broken' system. Annie didn't buy it: *'I don't think that a single parent has that much control over any – what am I gonna do, go in and say…? You know, I don't have a control over the public school, what they're gonna do while my kids are there. I just don't.'* Within this calculation, Annie clearly shows that her kids are her first priority.

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

[6] '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. We employ the term only when the homeschooler has used it first.

Callie Marks, a former public school elementary teacher, lives in a one story house in a medium-sized city in the South. She and her spouse, a pastor at a local Protestant church, have four children – all of whom are homeschooled. But she didn't plan on homeschooling. She told us:

> *We're real community people. I love knowing my neighbors and being involved in the community so I just assumed that when my kid turned five I would just send them to the local public school around the block because what better way to know your neighbors and be involved in the community? And that was just a no-brainer to me.*

But when her oldest turned five, although Callie knew the teachers in the school and thought they were '*wonderful people*,' they couldn't '*control what those kids are bringing into the environment*.' Worried about some of the potential influences, Callie says she wasn't ready to turn her son over to the school and '*send him off for eight hours a day – it just seemed, kind of, a real sad idea*.' For mothers like Callie, and we heard this from several others, a desire to maintain the tight and intimate mother-child bond is a key motivator for homeschooling, especially in their early years. Presumably, she made the calculation that such a bond was more important than the 'no-brainer' of being involved in the community by sending her kids to local public schools. We asked Callie if she was at all compelled by an interest in involving herself in the local school by sending her kids there and participating to improve it. She said:

> *I kind of get that, but it feels a little bit like a cost-benefit ratio. I could sacrifice 35 hours a week with my kids and a whole lot of my time and energy to go and beat my head against a very established system that I personally probably am not the one to do a lot about. Now, if I had ten other moms and we all decided to go rush the schools, enroll our kids, and – that could appeal to me. I would be open to that, but I don't have that.*

Like Annie, Callie sees little opportunity to change the system, and against those odds she prefers to focus on her own children.

Carol Scott was even more direct. When we suggested the criticism that homeschoolers are only interested in their own good, not a larger public good, she agreed: '*They're exactly right.'* Carol is a religious homeschooler with three teenage children, whose spouse is a physician. They live in a large, newly built home on a cul-da-sac in a fairly rural area in a Midwestern state. Carol was clear that her children are her first priority:

> *Because of my Christian worldview, I believe strongly that God gave us these children and my responsibility is to raise these children, not everyone else's children. I need to have an input where I can be a servant and participate, but then at the end of the day, it's these three that I have ultimate – we are gonna answer before the Lord for. Yeah, I definitely want to pour into these three. These three are my goal.*

Carol's vision of the world seems to be a kind of zero-sum game, and she's focused on her own children, '*not everyone else's*.' When we followed up with her and suggested that some Christians might feel compelled to love their neighbor, and that might include loving your neighbor's children, she responded: '*I'm gonna say it's possible that I could do more good. But I'm completely convinced/convicted that, at least for our family, this is the best way for us to prepare our kids to be, to impact and to love those around them in society*.'

Simran Berner is a Mormon unschooling mom in a Western state. Without a college degree and on her second marriage, Simran is a second-generation homeschooler. Simran has grown to see homeschooling as deeply aligned with a view of the family as central, a view she sees as rooted in her Mormon faith. We asked her what she thinks about the criticism that homeschooling, in its withdrawal, does not contribute to the public good, and whether she has conversations with her children about what it means to be a good citizen. Simran was clear: '*My first consideration is not what is good for the public sector. My first consideration is what is good for my family*.'

These homeschoolers, for varying reasons, seem to make a 'cost-benefit' analysis when weighing their educational options, and all make a calculation that homeschooling their children is in their best interest. That is, the costs are lower, and benefits greater, to focus their attention on their own kids through homeschooling than through their participation in any public good of the local school. For homeschooling critics, the story here is simple: our data suggest exactly what they predicted, that homeschooling families are overly self-interested; that they 'indicate a preference for an economic-style approach to public life,' where they can not only pursue private interests but also be free to 'define their own 'good'' apart from 'the idea of public production of civic virtue' (Lubienski 2000: 227, 228).

Keeping this interpretation on the table, we offer another. The homeschoolers in our study challenge their critics, and perhaps even their own self-telling; we suggest that their experiences of homeschooling tells a story, intentional or not, about what it might mean to pursue 'common goods', as distinct from private interests or public goods. Though they (and their theoretical critics) often lack a way of articulating their actions in regards to public/private goods outside of that of economic analysis, we argue that such a limitation of language may be a symptom of our dominant political and economic order, and may not accurately reflect what these homeschoolers tell us about their work to educate their children. That is, both homeschoolers and their critics present incoherent accounts of the movement when addressing the question of a public good. By probing the terms and dichotomies often confused by both sides of the debate – namely, 'self-interest', 'public goods', and 'economy' – and their relations to America's public, political experience as articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt, we propose that revising an older conception of an economy organized by common goods offers a better interpretation of the homeschoolers in our study, one that accounts for the negative narrative that unites them as well as the legitimate concerns of critics about their impact on liberal democracy.[7]

## Public Goods

The idea of 'self-interest' as an economic idea is often traced to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.[8] But Hannah Arendt and others see its roots much earlier than Smith's invisible hand, sourcing it in an ancient boundary

[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. Among the diversity of motivations, they are often all seen as withdrawing *from* school or advocating for private goods *in contrast to* public goods. Although they homeschool for different reasons, they are united by what they stand *against* – the public school.

[8] 'Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of.

between private and public life, with the private home as the *oikos* (the source of economic life).[9] In her turn to the Greeks, Arendt is clear that such a private sphere of the household is separate from politics, but she notes that the idea of material self-interest as a motivating factor for politics has its seeds in Aristotle: 'If one wishes to blame any single author for the so-called materialistic view of history, he must go as far back as Aristotle, who was the first to claim that interest, which he called the συμφέρον [*sympheron*], that which is useful for a person or for a group or for a people, does and should rule supreme in political matters' (1971: 14). Self-interest, despite its name, was conceptualized as driving citizens towards the public good, not away from it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, too, makes room for political motivation that is, at its heart, self-interested. For Tocqueville, 'self-interest' is, as his predecessors theorized, a striving towards material well-being, but one that leads citizens to submit to market forces as well as to the administration of an impersonal government, driving them towards individualism (Mansfield 1995: 54-55). But Tocqueville also saw in Americans the possibility of a utilitarian 'enlightenment' of such interests, which could educate them towards the sentiments that helped sustain their civic life; American moralists – like Benjamin Franklin – sought to combat that looming individualism by articulating for citizens that virtue is not some manifestation of selfless, beautiful deeds, but rather something useful and necessary (2002: 501 [II.ii.8]). Educating citizens in this manner was to habituate them into understanding individual interest as tied with the interests of one's neighbors and with the rule of government.[10] Without such education – what he termed *enlightened self-interest* – the taste for well-being, far from being a great pursuit of sinful wealth or achievement, would absorb citizens in the banal 'search for permitted enjoyments' (2002: 509 [II.ii.11]).[11] Civic and political associations might work together to form in citizens the fraternal desire and ability to pursue, undertake, and direct common affairs. But what ultimately secures the governing of men – and forces citizens outside of their private love of well-being – is an educated, utilitarian self-interest, one that could accommodate the darkness of private desire introduced into the ideals of political life.

Working out this emerging relationship between democratic government rule and expanding economic activity meant that, for moral philosophers of Tocqueville's time, the former private desires of the human heart and hearth must be addressed and tempered in public life in ways previously unknown. The rising popularity of the economic language of individual private interests grew alongside a new conception of public goods that differed from previously understood common goods, which were more closely related to the way Tocqueville understood civil and political associations. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes, public goods, unlike common goods, are rooted in the stories of the 'protagonists of the free market economy' and their

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It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages' (Smith [1776] 1976, I.ii).

[9] Arendt develops this in her work on labor in *The Human Condition* (1958).

[10] '[The] inhabitants of the United States,' Tocqueville writes, 'almost always know how to combine their own well-being with that of their fellow citizens' (2002: 501 [II.ii.8]).

[11] As Mansfield describes, ''Self-Interest rightly understood' is a doctrine that Tocqueville is not sure is correct, but knows to be American. Americans use it, he says, to combat the influence of individualism, that noxious opinion that causes individuals to feel impotent and isolated under the dominion of irresistible, impersonal material forces. The 'rightly understood' in the phrase expresses a hope that the necessary corrections to the doctrine can be found within it, so that it becomes in your interest to act against your interest wrongly understood' (1995: 63).

philosophical counterparts, who wrestled with the question of interest apart from a practical or classically political conception of goods (2016: 98, 168). Attempting to address how citizens would temper their desires and contribute to public life, such modern thinkers developed theories of binding but impersonal maxims that worked by emphasizing the universalist individual, which concealed 'the underlying moral and social conflicts of their society and by so doing sustained the workings of the agricultural, commercial, and mercantile economy to the profit of some and to the detriment of others' (MacIntyre 2016: 65, 85).

But it wasn't just that certain aspects of societal association and conflict were concealed from and by these modern thinkers. It was also that in the simultaneous transition to a wage economy built on the movement of surplus value, the idea that 'goods' could have inherent value lost its meaning (MacIntyre 2016: 97). A reformulation of the ground of economic transactions as individual, private interest helped pave the way for a modern concept of 'public goods', those economic goods that individuals cannot provide for themselves but need in order to be successful *as* individuals in modern life.

Public goods, like consumer goods, thrive on a collective balance of individual self-interest. While such goods began as more negative governmental protections, goods such as 'military and naval security from external threats, law and order, the building and maintenance of roads,' over time we have added – and continue to debate about such additions – others, like education, central banks, social security, and healthcare (MacIntyre 2016: 168). The primary relationship that sustains public goods is that between the individual's economic self-interest and the government – just as the primary relationship that sustains those modern moral theories is that between the individual and an authoritative universal maxim.

Such a change in the meaning of the 'public', binding it to the capitalist economy, is reflected in a shift in our understanding of 'happiness' from a common to an individual pursuit – one as empty of inherent value as the new material goods that helped fuel its development. The creation of a self-interest that would contribute to the public good relied on an illusion of what happiness was – that it was something that could be attained by the accumulation of private wealth. Such an illusion worked to motivate citizens towards a meritocratic ideal, one that would prize the individual who works hard in pursuit of wealth, contributing to the common only as necessary, as the good citizen in pursuit of the good life (MacIntyre 2016: 92). But this illusion of happiness has another description found in the pages of Arendt: the corruption of public happiness.

For Arendt, the spirit that gave birth to political revolutionaries was a love for freedom and happiness as seen for what they are: impossible to achieve alone. For early Americans, freedom was not a Hobbesian negative idea, but a collective experience: 'Americans knew that public freedom consisted in having a share in public business, and that the activities connected with this business by no means constitute a burden but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else' (Arendt 1971: 115).[12] This experience of freedom to conduct common affairs as the real source of happiness was a notion that would soon be swept up in the confusion between private and public spheres, noticeable in the writing of the

[12] The 'field where freedom has always been known,' Arendt writes, 'not as a problem to be sure, but as a fact of everyday life, is the political realm,' for the political realm itself began out of an effort to preserve freedom (1961: 146).

Declaration of Independence where both were subsumed under Thomas Jefferson's 'pursuit of happiness.'[13] Happiness took on a double meaning: 'private welfare as well as the right to public happiness, the pursuit of well-being as well as being a 'participator in public affairs'' (Arendt 1971: 129).

But almost as quickly as happiness took on a double meaning, it lost it. Reflected in the Bill of Rights' restraints upon government was the shift from a 'share in public affairs for the sake of public happiness to a guarantee that the pursuit of private happiness would be protected and furthered by public power' (Arendt 1971: 132). Public happiness, 'deprived of its double sense,' became 'the right of citizens to pursue their personal interests and thus to act according to the rules of private self-interest' (Arendt 1971: 132).[14] Far from the ideals of Tocqueville and other well-intentioned moral theorists of his time, the rules of self-interest, Arendt concludes, 'whether they spring from the dark desires of the heart or from the obscure necessities of the household, have never been notably 'enlightened'' (1971: 132).

In our day, the pursuit of private happiness and fulfillment of self-interest leads us *to* public goods, not away from them. We tend towards an individualistic approach to contributing to large and impersonal political and economic goods, which are hardly able to be separated so neatly. Homeschoolers, located between the public, political impulse of education and the private sphere of the economic household, bring these tensions and confusions to light, raising questions about the good of education. What if we began to look at the movement as in search of a common good, which has always defied such boundaries?

## Common Goods

Asked what they make of criticisms that argue homeschooling is not contributing to the public good but rather withdrawing from it, the homeschoolers in our study lack the language and theoretical background to argue that they contribute to 'common goods' or to 'civil society'. Like the rest of us, their language is dominated by concepts of the market and the state, which narrows thinking – particularly into the public/private dichotomy. But some families found ways of answering this question by talking about how they spend their time, and, often, their conception of a good citizen was not limited to (or even primarily understood as) political involvement. In order to understand how these families envision their civil lives, it is helpful to see how we might conceive of common actions that are not saturated by the concepts of self-interest and public goods.

Unlike public goods that rely on the individual and her private interests, common goods restructure our thinking altogether. While public goods are distinctly individualistic, both in their cooperation and enjoyment, common goods 'are only to be enjoyed and achieved . . . by individuals qua members of various groups or

[13] As Arendt describes, '[The] chances are that Jefferson himself was not very sure in his own mind which kind of happiness he meant when he made its pursuit one of the inalienable rights of man. His famous 'felicity of pen' blurred the distinction' (1971: 124).

[14] Arendt elaborates this further in *The Human Condition*: 'If one applies the principle of utility in this context at all, then it refers primarily not to use objects and not to usage but to the production process. Now what helps stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort is useful. In other words, the ultimate standard of measurement is not utility and usage at all, but 'happiness,' that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or in the consumption of things' (1958: 309).

qua participants in various activities' (MacIntyre 2016: 168). The good of this particular school, or the good of this particular family, takes a primary place as what provides the context and identity through which the success of the individual or the authority of administration might be measured. Tocqueville, though advocating for an enlightened self-interest in matters of government, also illustrates such common goods as the moral backdrop that sustained and fueled American political life from its inception.

Whereas certain public goods operate according to the growing desires of economic self-interest (enlightened or not), civil and political associations have another purpose, one that extends beyond utility – they teach citizens how to move beyond their personal interests and towards things held in common. 'It is a question,' Tocqueville writes, 'of a commercial undertaking to direct, of an industrial operation to conclude; they meet each other and unite' (2002: 496 [II.ii.7]). Civil and political associations work together inculcating American citizens into the art of pursuing common goods. For civil associations, attention to small common affairs draw men together and, whether they know it or not, enable them 'to pursue great ones in common' (Tocqueville 2002: 496 [II.ii.7]). Likewise, large political associations help men see clearly a common purpose in coming together, serving as a 'great school' where men can learn 'to submit their will to that of the others and subordinate their particular efforts to the common action,' preparing them for civil associations just as civil associations prepare them for politics (Tocqueville 2002: 496 [II.ii.7]).

Like Tocqueville's conception of the function of associations, Kerri Stevens, a religious, African-American homeschooling mom in the Midwest and former law enforcement officer, sees citizenship as starting in the home and neighborhood and extending outward towards political life:

> *So to me, citizenship starts with how they treat each other in the household. How they treat their parents. You know, that's all a part of it. How they treat people in the community. Are they, are they rude, you know, to the other kids? Are they nice, are they sharing? Do we share our vegetables when we grow them in the garden?*
>
> *. . . I think that it overlaps. And history, when you're looking at the Constitution, we looked at the Founding Fathers, you know? What did we fight for, why are we here? What's the whole point?*
>
> *As African Americans, you know, we talk about the Civil Rights Movement. We talk about, you know, I talk to them about what my grandparents fought for, how things were for them and what they had to do to get the rights that they have, so that they don't forfeit or think that it's no big deal that people had to fight and die for the rights that we have.*
>
> *And I think you can say that for all groups of people, you know? That somebody had to fight for what was right.*

While Kerri's understanding of citizenship begins with her particular family, it extends to political movements and to American ideals. But she also describes the homeschool co-operative[15] that she and her son, Jaden, are involved in as a lived version of citizenship, where Jaden learns in practice – through other families' homes – what they study about citizenship:

[15] Homeschool co-operatives run the gamut from structured school-like environments with shared property and hired teachers to occasional gatherings in homes or public spaces.

*So I do think it overlaps. It overlaps in, you know, a lot of the subjects that we cover, and then it overlaps into just our daily lives, you know? Even when you look at the co-operatives, that's about citizenship and community, you know?*

*[When] we're going to someone else's house, you have to respect their house, you need to do what they ask you to do, you need to, you don't sit on the back of the furniture. You know, those types of things. But then also, I'm not gonna just have this person teach my kids. I'm gonna, I'm gonna contribute a snack. I'm going to help out if I'm needed.*

*You know? So, so we all work together. So that everybody benefits. So I think that's all citizenship.*

Kerri sees in their co-operative an opportunity for learning how to be a citizen that sees political life as active participation, one modeled on contribution and common work. Kerri's son, Jaden, seems to have learned the message, and sees the role of a good citizen as *'Being someone who will volunteer for their city or state or even country. Who wouldn't have second thoughts about helping someone in need.'* For Kerri and her family, that citizenship is primarily fostered in the home and the neighborhood doesn't lead away from the political, but towards it. Although Kerri and her family do not directly contribute to the public good of education, their participation in the common goods of their neighborhood and their co-operative group seem to form within Jaden a vibrant understanding of political life and what it means to be a good citizen.

But civic and political associations do more than just teach us to contribute disinterestedly – they also, paradoxically, educate and fulfill our desires. Although Arendt articulates this experience of association in terms of freedom and happiness, she understands both of these notions in a classical rather than modern sense. As we noted earlier, public happiness was understood as reachable only in activities held in common with others. It was the experience of 'life in Congress, the joys of discourse, of legislation, of transacting business, of persuading and being persuaded,' which was so great that Arendt compares it to the happiness of Socrates in dialogue (Arendt 1971: 128-129). For Arendt, the world that is built by people engaged in common dialogue and action – in other words, in association – is the fulfillment of any individual's story; outside of such association, freedom and happiness are mere illusions.[16]

For some of the families in our sample, co-operatives serve as more than just places to exchange resources or teach children how to contribute and work with others. They also serve as communities that cultivate a friendship among the parents that enables an agency to conduct affairs, something often perceived as lost in conventional education systems. While Callie didn't like the idea of abandoning the public school system, she also thought that unless a person held *'a position of pretty considerable influence or . . . a really great plan and support system,*' the chance for involvement and reform was small. Most homeschooling co-operatives, by contrast, thrive on that kind of parental involvement, often teaching parents how to engage in collective action in the process. Lauren Thompson, a religious homeschooling mom who described the moral coherence of their co-operative as comparable to having '*20 other parents*,' told us,

*And even at the co-op, like the fact that Tuesdays is a day where parents are supposed to follow their kids around, sit in on the classrooms, those first weeks for me were like, 'This is just weird having a parent here.' And now I really like*

[16] 'For action and speech, which, as we saw before, belonged close together in the Greek understanding of politics, are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be' (Arendt 1958: 97).

*it. I like that – for me, it feels like it eases a burden. Like I can say, 'I can teach your child about math and I can teach you about math –*

*Interviewer: And you can reinforce it?*

*Lauren: And you can reinforce it, but you can teach me about your child.' And I feel like in that sense, I guess if there was that openness maybe to that. I don't think parents feel confident enough to do that. Most parents don't feel confident enough to do it or are interested in doing it. I think there is an attraction in, 'Here, you take them, you take care of this.'*

Lauren sees her co-operative as teaching and providing something for the parents as much as for the children. For Lauren, it is not just about reinforcing lessons that kids bring home from school, but about being drawn out and into the concerns of other parents and the collective activity of educating more generally; such co-operative activities become their own kind of discourse, business, and legislation.

This ability to dialogue and act together is not just abstractly good for parents; many families see co-operatives as offering friendship and an experience of happiness that offsets what could be an otherwise lonely pursuit. As Annika Preston, a religious homeschooling mom of five and a former teacher, described:

*But then we started bonding with other families because you do a lot when you're in co-op sometimes. And they would invite us to do stuff. We'd have like, in the beginning, once a month field trips every Friday. Then roller skating every – like the first Friday was field trips. The second Friday was roller skating. The third Friday was bowling. The fourth Friday was ice skating. So they were totally socialized way more than I ever was and had fun but still got all the school work done, and we were way ahead.*

*. . . [And] it was a great support group. We had monthly meetings, and you'd sit in a circle with other moms, and you'd be like, 'Oh, you're struggling with this. You're struggling with that. I'm normal.' And you had meetings with portfolio advisors twice a year.*

*And then never in my wildest dreams did I believe I would be doing it this long. It's like going on 15 years. It's a career.*

For Annika, co-operatives offer opportunities to socialize the children, but also the moms. Like Annika, several homeschooling families began homeschooling or participating in co-operatives without intending to stay for very long, only to find that it has become a community. As Kim Anderson, a religious inner-city homeschooling mom, described: *'We [didn't] wanna leave our friends once we got into the group.'*

Arendt's account of public happiness seems to fit the practices of several of these families. Arendt is clear, however, that the crown of associations are the political ones; though many associations comprise 'the world,' the public, political philosophy exhibited in democracies is what raises man to Aristotle's 'political animal.' It is a love for such political deliberation and action that led Arendt to seek to preserve the fraternal spirit of democracy and the cultural inheritance that could uphold it. Arendt's conception of the world and its cultural objects and texts, shaped by her political reading of the Greeks, meant that her standard of excellence was earthly immortality: 'An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure . . . If we wanted to judge an object by its use value alone, and not also by its appearance (that is, by whether it is beautiful or ugly or something in

between), we would first have to pluck out our eyes' (1960: 286). Were the economic understanding of private well-being, the foundation of which is the mortal cycle of the life-process, to grab hold of and consume culture, the objects that have endured over time would lose their power to arrest our attention, to move us, and we would in turn lose our ability to 'preserve and cultivate' (Arendt 1960: 286). The danger, for Arendt, is that if we lose the political – which outlives us – as our highest aim and allow the economic to take over, we will also lose our culture.

Homeschoolers present a paradox for this understanding of the political preservation of culture in Arendt, as they are located in the traditional economic sphere of the household and would seem to have as their primary interest the economic necessity of labor – a private interest in their own children that takes precedence over political culture. But while their primary interest *is* economic, it may be economic of a different kind – one that is focused on the preservation and cultivation of diverse common goods that, quite the opposite of consuming, form the bedrock of political life and provide its sustenance. When seen as contributing to an economy of common goods, we are better able to understand why some homeschooling families might see political activity as of secondary importance. As one Midwestern homeschooling mom of five, Samantha Kline, told us: *'I guess if I had to talk about civic responsibilities, it would probably be focused on being generous with your time and your money and giving it to people. That probably would be a big focus for me; more than the political part.'*

As we saw earlier, Tocqueville held similar fears as Arendt over the demise of political association in his concerns over public administration. If the side of governing that required only that individual self-interest from its citizens took precedence, public administration would overtake and direct what ought to be the place of association between citizens (Tocqueville 2002: 491, 500 [II.ii.5, 8]). Associations are the only democratic means by which citizens engage in collective action; without this collective action, we risk not only our ability to collectively govern private or public affairs, but also to educate each other and the next generation in the kind of cultural sentiments and ideas that make possible political imagination (Tocqueville 2002: 491 [II.ii.5]). When citizens have opportunity to 'associate freely in all things, in the end they see in association the universal, and so to speak the unique, means' to meet any new need. On the other hand, if citizens have few opportunities to associate, they 'regard association as a rare and singular procedure and they scarcely ever dare to think of it' (Tocqueville 2002: 497 [II.ii.7]). The preservation of a common culture through civil associations and common 'habits of the heart' went hand in hand with the power of associations, particularly the political ones, to enlarge our political imagination and action.

The threat to political association, then, was twofold: the growing economy and the expanding governmental administration. But it wasn't just that there was a threat from outside of political association – it also came from within, from the diminishing of civil association and the coherent cultural ideals that upheld it. Mark Holman, a religious homeschooling dad in the Northeast, responded to our presentation of critics' concerns about homeschooling by speaking of a tension between the cultural education he perceives as coherent in other nations as compared to our own:

> *I understand the criticism and I respect it, and I'm aware that in places like Germany, for example, it's against the law to homeschool because they believe very strongly as a state, and I guess as a culture, those values of everybody being trained in a certain way.*
>
> *. . . I guess it's the American in me that very much wants to embrace homeschooling.*

Mark's vision could signal the alarms of critics – what about the 'common school,' the project of 'public knowledge'? When we listen to some of the homeschoolers in our sample, we find that their withdrawal from such ideals of coherent political education signals a negative narrative, but not one that opposes tolerance or diversity; rather, their withdrawal often opposes a narrative of market values as what ought to take precedence in the lives of their families. Their perceptions of the dominant culture in conventional education is often that of the economic values of competition and consumerism.[17]

When we asked Liza Davidson, a non-religious homeschooling mom of four in California, whether an unschooling approach would lead to narcissism, she pushed back and described homeschooling as a natural shelter from competition, a shelter that, paradoxically, provides greater opportunities for children to be exposed to how adults cooperate and not just compete in the real workings of local economy:

> *So I think they interact with the world a lot more than people realize, and I think that they learn – we have a local grocery store here that I love. I want to hug the people I love them so much. They're so great, and my kids know all the people because we go there all the time. That's just a silly little example, but they are interacting with the world way more than the average school child. There is no competition, which I don't believe that our world is meant to be competitive.*
>
> *I'm not against competitive sports, but I think our world is meant to be cooperative, and I think when your kids are allowed the freedom to express themselves and be who they want and delve into the things that interest them and follow their passions, they want other people to do the same thing, too. He's practicing his Ukulele. Anyway, it's a completely different mindset. In the classroom, you've got a bunch of kids the same age. There's always going to be a competition.*

Liza sees diverse interactions, interests, and ages as natural conduits that educate her children in the cooperation that makes a local economy of common goods flourish.

Brigitte Boucher, also an unschooler, told a similar story, but one focused on how her sacrifices at home allow her daughter, Cecelia, the freedom to care for others' needs in a way that is made difficult by the classroom ethos: '*The teacher can't take care of you and 20 other kids. Not really, she can't take care of your needs. Your job is to take care of your needs. And so the training is to take care of yourself. You know you have to take care of what you need first and if you have a little left over than you can you know look out for other people.*' When describing her daughter's experience volunteering, Brigitte stressed that because Cecelia had her needs taken care of at home, she had more energy and enthusiasm to be involved in the community:

[17] Respondents' perceptions of public schools, and even of private schools, come up frequently in the interview data. Perceptions, of course, do not always match reality. In some cases, these perceptions are based on actual experiences in a conventional school – either the student has previously been educated in a conventional school, or, as in the case of several of the moms we interviewed, the parent is a former teacher. In other cases, however, the perceptions were not based on any recent experiences in conventional 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, the important sociological point is that the human imagination is a powerful force, and perceptions have a way of palpably structuring the parameters of social life and interactions.

*But because she didn't need to come home and scrub the floor here, she was insistent that the floor there – you know, their kitchen floor, you could eat off of.*

*And mine, like you could eat off of, because there's a feast of food. You know, so – I feel like because she had the energy, because she didn't need to take care of herself, she could go out and serve others. And it isn't a lighthearted amount of helping others. It's – it's a lot. It's a lot she does for others and I don't think she really thinks of it that way. It's just things she enjoys doing.*

It's not just that Brigitte sees her sacrifices as providing extra time for Cecelia to care for others. Brigitte also sees in her daughter an ethic of care that refuses the boundaries of self-interest and utility – something she describes in Cecelia's friendship and activism regarding a co-operative classmate who is autistic:

*. . . And I – and she had organized an autism awareness workshop. And I said, 'You know this could be your – like you could do it as a community service thing for girl scouts.' And she got so indignant and she got tears in her eyes and she looked at me and she said – it's going to make me cry [respondent begins to cry], but she said, 'Mom if – if I – if I got a badge and [my friend] found out, I wouldn't want her to think that she's a project. What if she thought she was a project? I don't want an award, I just want people to understand her better.'*

For Brigitte and Liza, homeschooling provides a distance from their perceptions of dominant values like competition and selfishness, and the space to encourage a different approach to community in their children. For those in pursuit of common goods, given a political and cultural climate that prizes maximizing individual interest above all else, they find themselves already 'systematically at odds with those of the dominant culture that they inhabit, commonly without realizing this' (MacIntyre 2016: 167). For many of the homeschooling families we interviewed, this extends beyond just an opposition to a competitive culture. It also means a radical critique of consumerism.

Simran, who told us at the beginning that she was interested primarily in the good of her family, sees that good not as primarily self-interested, but as more aligned with the world of 'real things' than what she perceives as occurring in conventional education:

*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.*

Simran's emphasis against consumerism was echoed by several parents, some who talked of thrift-shopping with other co-operative parents, and some who vocally rejected the push for homeschool curriculums to become a heavily profit-based market. And like Simran, many of them see their children as developing an ethic that opposes that of self-interest:

*They really wanna make a positive change. And, I don't see this in any of my children that they're selfish – looking at it like, 'What can I get? How can this benefit me? What can I get from my government, or from my church, or my friends or my family?' They're – they wanna help other people, and they want to be kind, and they're not – yeah, they're just not willing to follow along.*

*. . . they're not here to serve themselves, that they're here to first serve God. And, by serving their fellow man, they're serving God.*

When asked what she wanted for her children as they enter adulthood and leave the home, Simran said she was okay with everything else as long as they achieved one thing: *'Not focusing on themselves.'*

Several of the homeschooling families in our sample offer visions of the kind of environment that might foster the experiment of civic virtue, for both children and their parents. For Arendt, 'the desire to excel,' or to exercise the political virtues in situations of speech and action, is what 'makes men love the world and enjoy the company of their peers, and drives them into public business' (1971: 116). But it is not just within and around directly political matters that the formation and exercise of practical reason takes place. As MacIntyre writes, 'Happily, it is not only within the *polis* that human beings can flourish as rational animals' (2016: 224). While MacIntyre's conception of reason is rooted in that shared by Arendt and Aristotle, he expands it to restore the sphere of the household.[18] In debates about public goods, proponents will 'often claim that by so arguing they are promoting the common good.' But these arguments, while often pressed with the best intentions, obscure the difference between public and common goods (2016: 168). Common goods call to be understood outside of the modern economic terms of 'private' and 'public', of 'choice' and 'self-interest'. This is because common goods, as with civic and political associations, educate our interests and imaginations; as much as they are the result of previously formed desires, they also give us a place to exercise and try virtue anew.

As noted earlier, many of the families in our sample do not see their actions and decisions in homeschooling as contributing directly to political life, and several conceive of a good citizen as someone who doesn't necessarily vote or actively participate in American democratic life. On the other end of the spectrum, we also interviewed families who were heavily involved in political campaigning, perhaps in ways that would concern the critics.[19] Nevertheless, many of these families sustain lives of civic and political practices that, if the theorists we have relied upon are correct, educate their desires and their reason in ways that may, intentionally or not, push against the desires of economic self-interest.

[18] MacIntyre's conception of 'common goods,' and his reliance on both Aquinas and Marx as voices to heed in our time, provides a corrective to Arendt's desire to keep Aristotle's concept of political activity from the impurity of the social: '[The] special relationship between action and being together seems fully to justify the early translation of Aristotle's *zōon politkon* by *animal socialis* . . . More than any elaborate theory, this unconscious substitution of the social for the political betrays the extent to which the original Greek understanding of politics had been lost' (Arendt 1958: 24).

[19] Some families were politically active through 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. It should also be noted that 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.*'

## Conclusion

When education is seen as a common good, one of the questions a good school (whether a public school, a private school, or a homeschool) raises is how to develop in students 'an adequate sense of the ends that should be theirs as contrasted with the ends that others for their own purposes impose upon them' (MacIntyre 2016: 173). A lack of communal reasoning over those ends produces students whose purposes are defaulted to become uncritical 'autonomous preference maximizers who bring their skills to market' (MacIntyre 2016: 173-174). Homeschoolers do, indeed, 'define their own 'good',' as critics argue (Lubienski 2000: 228). But we suggest that some homeschoolers put forth, in their practices, an economy of common goods that challenges the public/private dichotomy and the market ideals that tend to accompany it.

Homeschoolers may not embody a self-interest that leads to the public good, nor do they likely believe in a coherent account of educating for civic virtue through public education. But homeschooling, when understood as a place where families have the freedom to pursue a common good of education, may be seen as 'a kind of moral laboratory for resolving dilemmas for which existing moral codes seem inadequate.'[20] In their pursuit of common goods, homeschoolers may lay the groundwork for civic virtue, albeit indirectly. Rooted in a negative narrative that questions the public good of education, homeschoolers rely on a form of association that was thought politically dangerous from the beginning of the revolutionary spirit.[21] For an economy of common goods forms the ground of the political life-cycle, tilling the soil and so re-imagining its limits and possibilities in the process. Perhaps homeschooling could undermine liberal democracy as it is so conceived, at least in its ties with the market, by signaling a different kind of economy.

[20] Wolfe 1989: 240. Wolfe echoes Tocqueville's sentiment that it is 'while enjoying a dangerous freedom that Americans learn the art of rendering the perils of freedom less great' (2002: 499 [II.ii.5, 8]).

[21] Homeschooling, as Fields-Smith and Kisura write, may turn out to be 'a more subtle 'revolution'' (2013: 280).

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 |

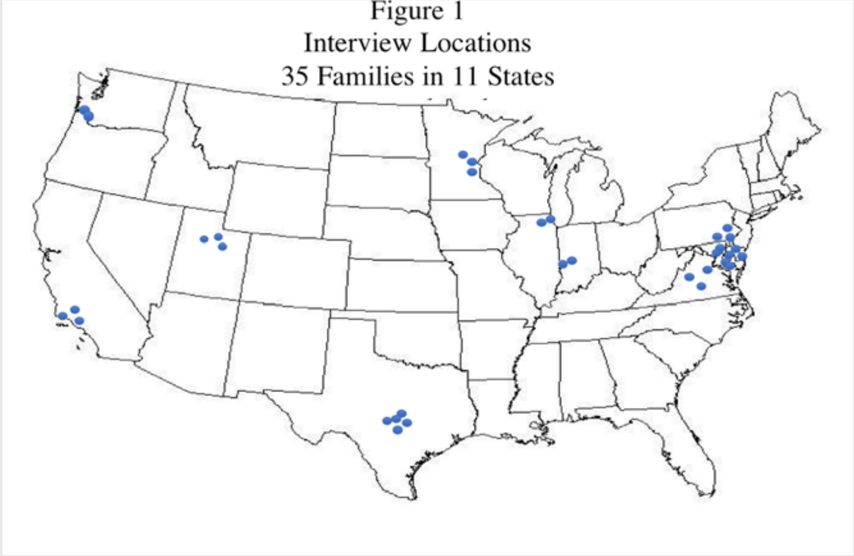
Figure 1
Interview Locations
35 Families in 11 States

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