



Editorial suggestion for viewing: This article contains many color figures, some in landscape. Figures 2 through 17 are placed after the conclusion. We suggest that you print out the first 9 pages of this article and read them while viewing Figures 2 through 17 onscreen. For the landscape figures, click in Adobe Reader on "View," "Rotate View," and "Clockwise."

Economist Petitions: Ideology Revealed

David Hedengren¹, Daniel B. Klein², and Carrie Milton³

ABSTRACT

Petitions are a way for a group of signatories to formulate a statement on an important issue and declare themselves publicly. Because the statements are open-ended, issue-specific, and not anonymous, petitioning is a meaningful mode of expression.

Petitioning by economists has a considerable history, including a 1903 UK petition against protectionism (Edgeworth et al 2010), a 1930 US petition against protectionism (Editors 2007), a 1933 US petition to raise the general price level (Brown 1933), a 1981 UK petition against Thatcher's macroeconomic policy (Wood 2006, Booth 2007), and a 1991 New Zealand petition against deficit cutting (Kerr 1994).

The internet has advanced the practice, and the inventory of economist petitions has become substantial. Being public in nature, petitions are not hard to track down. We posted a working list ([link](#)), solicited further tips, and arrived at a set of 35 petitions for analysis, dated between 1994 and 2009.

We have counted as "economist petition" any published statement signed principally by economists to express and endorse a position on a public issue. We

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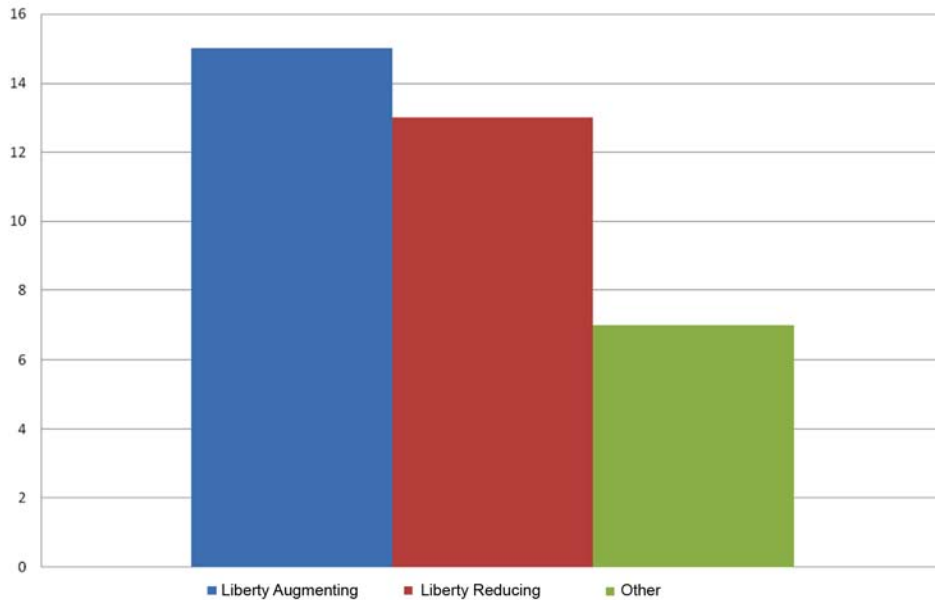
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included all signatories, *not just the economists*. In fact, we did nothing to determine a signatory’s status as an “economist.” Of the 35 petitions, the lowest number of signatories is 10. The mean number of signatures on a petition is 308.

We categorize the 35 petitions based on, not the argumentation contained in the petition, but the nature of the proposed reform. In our treatment, the reform’s “nature” turns on the *liberty principle*. We separated the 35 petitions into three categories: liberty augmenting, liberty reducing, and other. The number of petitions in each category is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Number of petitions by petition type



Our framework works from the classical-liberal/libertarian idea of liberty. It works from the liberty principle, an issue-oriented formulation anchored in the status-quo saying: *If Reform₁ rates higher in liberty than Reform₂, then support Reform₁*. For example, the petition to raise the minimum wage proposes to initiate coercion against employers for certain erstwhile-legal actions (paying someone \$6/hr) that are themselves non-coercive according to the classical-liberal configuration of ownership. Note that “reform” may entail no change at all, or simply represent the status quo—and, indeed, that is usually the relevant comparison in classifying a petition.

Classical-liberal semantics carry a presumption of liberty, but we do not mean to imply any 100-percent ethical commitment to the liberty principle. Principles vie with and compromise one another. With Adam Smith, we believe

that exceptions to the liberty principle have a place, and are to be treated as exceptional. Exceptions do not preclude a notion from principle-hood. We confess our liberal sensibilities and the role they play in our formulations, but, strictly speaking, we do not pass judgment on any on the petitions treated in this paper.

The idea of ranking Reform₁ and Reform₂ (which, again, may be no reform at all) in terms of classical-liberal liberty is, admittedly, sometimes vague and indeterminate, but for most of the petitions—as with the minimum wage petition—it is reasonably straightforward. Some of the petitions are harder to classify using the liberty principle. Some petitions lead into problems that Klein and Clark (2010) discuss in terms of possible disagreement between “direct liberty” and “overall liberty,” a certain kind of ambiguity sometimes plaguing the liberty principle.⁴ Also, some petitions address issues of public administration—government rules governing the use of government property—where the liberty principle simply does not apply, at least not directly.

The petitions classified as “other” are of three sorts: those that deal principally with public administration, those that address party politics (John Kerry, John McCain), and those of which we simply did not feel sufficiently confident in classifying in terms of overall liberty.

We have collected the text of the 35 petitions into a single pdf ([link](#)). The signature data is compiled in an Excel file ([link](#)). Table 1 lists the 35 petitions and shows how we classified each. In a couple of instances, it would, in our view, have been reasonable to classify the petition other than as we have, but, again, in the vast majority of cases the classification is straight-forward based on the stated criteria.⁵

4. While Klein and Clark (2010) focuses on the ambiguity of the liberty principle arising from possible disagreement between direct and overall liberty, Klein (2004) offers a fuller taxonomy of the limitations of the principle.

5. We have classified John Cochrane’s 24 Sept. 2008 petition about bailouts—which concludes: “we ask Congress not to rush, to hold appropriate hearings, and to carefully consider the right course of action, and to wisely determine the future of the financial industry and the U.S. economy for years to come”—as *other*, but it also would be reasonable to classify it as *liberty augmenting*. Of our judgments in classifying a petition, the most controversial would probably be our classifying the 4 March 2004 petition about cap-and-trade as liberty reducing.

Table 1: The 35 Petitions, 1994-2009

Label	Date	Organizer/ Sponsor	Category	Signatures ⁶	Affiliations	Universities
Support Market Oriented Health Care Reform 1994	03/16/94	The Independent Institute	Augm	637	233	216
Oppose Antitrust Protectionism	06/02/99	The Independent Institute	Augm	240	137	129
Support Market Oriented Health Care Reform 2000	03/01/00	The Independent Institute	Augm	538	254	236
Economists for Sweatshops	07/29/00	Academic Consortium on International Trade	Augm	252	117	102
Oppose Death Tax	05/21/01	National Taxpayers Union	Augm	279	172	148
Scholars Against Sweatshop Labor	10/22/01	Political Economy Research Institute	Reduc	435	196	182
Oppose Bush Tax Cuts	02/01/03	Economic Policy Institute	Reduc	464	197	156
Oppose Tax Increase	01/14/04	National Taxpayers Union	Augm	116	96	73
Endorse John Kerry for President	08/25/04	John Kerry Campaign (Not Sure)	Other	10	7	6
Oppose John Kerry for President	10/13/04	George W. Bush Campaign (Not Sure)	Other	367	229	187
Warning Future of Social Security	05/11/05	Cato Institute	Augm	454	274	191
Increase Immigration	06/19/06	The Independent Institute	Augm	523	270	232
Support Raising the Minimum Wage	09/27/06	The Economic Policy Institute	Reduc	659	288	237
Oppose Marijuana Prohibition	11/30/06	Marijuana Policy Project	Augm	554	351	344
Oppose Government Regulation of Internet ("Network Neutrality")	03/28/07	AEI-Brookings Joint Center	Augm	17	13	9
Statement on Prediction Markets	05/01/07	AEI-Brookings Joint Center	Augm	25	16	12
Economists Against Protectionism	08/01/07	The Club for Growth	Augm	1028	426	367

6. There are some petitions where we found fewer names than the publisher suggests. However the difference is less than 0.05% of signatures.

ECONOMIST PETITIONS

Oppose "Windfall Taxes"	10/17/07	National Taxpayers Union	Augm	234	178	143
Support John McCain Economic Plan	05/11/08	John McCain Campaign (Not Sure)	Other	326	213	158
Raising Some Concerns about Government Bail Out for Mortgages	09/24/08	John Cochrane	Other	230	61	57
Support Government Bail Out for Mortgages	10/01/08	Unknown	Reduc	76	34	16
Concerned about Climate Change	10/07/08	Nancy Olewiler	Reduc	254	43	40
Support Federal Recovery Act	11/19/08	Center for Economic and Policy Research	Reduc	387	193	157
Oppose Federal Recovery Act	01/27/09	Cato Institute	Augm	203	130	128
Oppose Budget Reduction in Washington State	02/19/09	Washington State Budget & Policy Center	Reduc	22	11	7
Support Employee Free Choice Act	02/24/09	The Economic Policy Institute	Reduc	40	23	18
Support Cap and Trade	03/04/09	Southern Alliance for Clean Energy	Reduc	601	341	271
Replace Federal Income Tax with FairTax	03/29/09	FairTax.org	Other	80	75	71
Support Using Procurement Auctions Over Grant Submissions	04/13/09	Paul Milgrom	Other	64	30	25
Support Government Intervention to Promote Biofuels	04/21/09	Union of Concerned Scientists	Reduc	16	14	12
Oppose Green Protectionism	05/08/09	Atlas Global Initiative for Free Trade Peace and Prosperity	Augm	1215	648	349
Fed Independence Petition	07/15/09	Wall Street Journal	Other	183	52	29
Support Tax Increase on Corporations and High Income Persons	10/07/09	Oregon Center for Public Policy	Reduc	36	16	10
Government Oriented Health Care Reform 2009	11/17/09	Unknown	Reduc	23	10	7
Support for a Financial Transactions Tax	12/03/09	Center for Economic and Policy Research	Reduc	204	122	103

All of the remaining figures of this paper, that is, Figures 2 through 17 appear after the conclusion.

Figure 2 displays the number and type of petitions by the organizer/sponsor. Organizers canvass for signatures using their networks and email lists. It is not as though every economist is perfectly informed of every opportunity to sign a petition and reveal his or her preferences accordingly.

Figure 3 shows the number of signatures by petition type, with a grand total of 10,792 signatures.⁷

There are nearly twice as many liberty-augmenting signatures as liberty-reducing signatures.

Figure 4 displays the number of unique signatories by petition type. In this breakdown, an individual who, for example, signs three liberty-augmenting petitions and one liberty-reducing petition will appear once as a liberal signatory and once as an interventionist signatory. Thus, the sum of unique liberty-augmenting, liberty-reducing, and other signatories is *greater than* the 6,030 unique signatories (shown in gray). Considerably more individuals have signed a liberty-augmenting petition than have signed a liberty-reducing petition.

Figure 5 shows individuals who signed at least nine petitions. The most activist economists support liberty-augmenting petitions.

Figure 6 shows individuals who signed at least eight liberty-augmenting petitions signed (the set overlaps greatly with that of Figure 5). The most remarkable thing about the figure is its scarcity of red: The 63 individuals shown there lend 564 signatures to liberty-augmenting petitions, and only 5 signatures to liberty-reducing petitions—and, by the way, all five of those signatures are on the cap-and-trade petition. One of the most striking findings of our study is that there is very little crossover between pro- and anti-liberty activities. Almost all active petition signers lean heavily toward either liberalism or interventionism. Our study indicates how fundamental ideology and worldview really are.

Figure 7 shows individuals who signed at least four liberty-reducing petitions. Notice the scarcity of blue in the figure.

Figure 8 shows Nobel laureates. Although there is a liberal bent among the group overall, it is weaker than the entire population of signatures. Many of the Nobel laureates since 1990 have zero signatures, namely, Robert Aumann, Ronald H. Coase, Robert F. Engle III, Robert W. Fogel, John C. Harsanyi, Leonid Hurwicz, Paul R. Krugman, James A. Mirrlees, Roger B. Myerson, John F. Nash

7. We recorded all signatures (US and foreign) from all petitions with the exception of the petition opposing green protectionism. That petition (as of 8 May 2009) had “approximately 3300” signatures ([Link](#)). Because of resource constraints we were only able to extract signatures from the 1,216 US signatories.

Jr., Elinor Ostrom, Edmund S. Phelps, Myron S. Scholes, Reinhard Selten, Amartya Sen, Michael Spence, William Vickrey, and Oliver E. Williamson.

Figure 9 includes selected economists not included in the preceding figures.

Figure 10 shows the difference by gender. As a proportion of each gender's liberty-reducing signatures, men's liberty-augmenting signatures are 2.25 and women's are 0.83—a striking result that extends findings that women economists are more interventionist than men economists (May and Whaples 2010; Stastny 2010).

Figure 11 shows the 25 institutions by most appearances with a signature. (If the Hoover Institution were folded into the Stanford University total, Stanford would then be second in the ranking.)

Figure 12 shows the 25 institutions by most appearances with a liberty-augmenting signature. (If the Hoover Institution were folded into the Stanford University total, Stanford would then be second in the ranking.)

Figure 13 shows the 25 institutions by most appearances with a liberty-reducing signature. Many of the institutions which have the most liberty-reducing signatures also have a goodly number of liberty-augmenting signatures. In fact, for 8 of the 25 there are more liberty-augmenting than liberty-reducing signatures. Of particular interest are those universities which appear in both Figure 11 and Figure 12, namely, Harvard, University of Michigan, Columbia, Stanford, and UCLA: each has more liberty-augmenting than liberty-reducing signatures.

Figure 14 plots institutions based on the quotient: liberty-augmenting signatures/(liberty-augmenting + liberty-reducing signatures). (This set is limited to institutions with 30 or more signatures.) Of the 25 highest institutions, 22 have a quotient greater than 90 percent. (Inside each bar is the number of liberty-augmenting signatures.)

Figure 15 plots institutions based on the quotient: liberty-reducing signatures/(liberty-augmenting + liberty-reducing signatures). (Inside each bar is the number of liberty-reducing signatures.) For the 25 highest institutions, the quotient quickly falls under 90 percent and is as low as about 40 percent. This is quite different than Figure 14 showing the liberty-augmenting quotients.

For the institutions at the upper end of Figure 15, the results are quite striking. Since pro-liberty sentiment in academe is usually found especially among economists, and since the data comes from petitions consisting principally of economists, the data strongly suggests that the institutions leading this quotient are particularly unfriendly to liberty.

Several of the top 25 economics departments as ranked by *US News and World Report* (2009) (see Figure 16) are among the highest 25 in liberty-reducing quotient, whereas none except the University of Rochester and the Hoover Institution (at Stanford) are among the highest 25 in liberty-augmenting quotient.

However, among institutions with at least 40 liberty-assessed signatures, the University of Chicago, Duke University, and Stanford University (if Hoover were folded into it) are among the top 25 institutions ranked by *US News and World Report*, and they have liberty-augmenting quotients that are high, though not among the top 25 listed in Figure 14.

Figure 16 shows the signatures of the top 25 economics departments as ranked by *US News and World Report* (2009). Again, the signatures of, say, Harvard University are from any signatory from Harvard; the signatures are not confined to members of the economics departments.

Figure 17 shows a nationwide map where darker shades of blue denote a higher liberty-augmenting quotient, lighter a lower. The figure suggests a relatively interventionist bent in the Northeast, especially Maine, Vermont, and Massachusetts. On the West coast, Oregon stands out for interventionism. Meanwhile, relatively high quotients are found in some of the states of the Southeast, the Midwest, and the Southwest.

Ideology Revealed

The most notable finding of this investigation is that virtually every single economist who is active in signing petitions leans heavily in one direction or the other. The pictures tell the story better than words can, but here are some facts put into words:

- The 63 economists who signed at least eight liberal petitions lent a grand total of 564 signatures to liberal petitions, but their signatures on interventionist petitions amounted to just five!
- The 102 economists who signed at least four interventionist petitions lent a grand total of 461 signatures to interventionist petitions, but their signatures on liberal petitions amounted to just sixteen!
- There were 589 economists who signed at least three liberal petitions, but only one also signed at least three interventionist petitions (and that individual, Malcolm Robinson, signed only three of each kind). Meanwhile, there were 230 economists who signed at least three interventionist petitions.
- In fact, among the 589 who signed at least three liberal petitions, there were, besides the aforementioned Malcolm Robinson, only two individuals who also signed at least two interventionist petitions, Carl F. Christ and Peter Crampton. But these two each leaned heavily in the liberal direction, signing five liberal and just two interventionist petitions. It is fair to say that Malcolm Robinson is the *only* exception

to the finding that economists who are active in signing petitions lean heavily one way or the other.

- Twenty-five Nobel-prize economists were among the set of signatories. Five of them signed at least three liberal petitions—Vernon Smith, Milton Friedman, Edward Prescott, Thomas Schelling, and Robert E. Lucas Jr.—and among those five economists there was not a single interventionist signature.
- Six other Nobel economists signed at least two interventionist petitions—Kenneth Arrow, Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Solow, George Akerlof, Lawrence Klein, and Daniel McFadden—and among those six economists there were just three liberal signatures.

Our investigation shows just how fundamental ideas about liberty and government intervention really are in the thinking of economists—or at least those who like to sign petitions.

Concluding Remark

Judgment about the most important things—that is, the most important issues, the most important positions on the issues, and the most important arguments for and against a position—is part of the scientific discipline of political economy. Petitions are a good way to formulate and express such judgment, both professionally and in public discourse generally. We may frown on particular formulations and signatures in support thereof, but we should not frown on the practice *per se*.

Figure 2: Number of petitions by organizer/sponsor

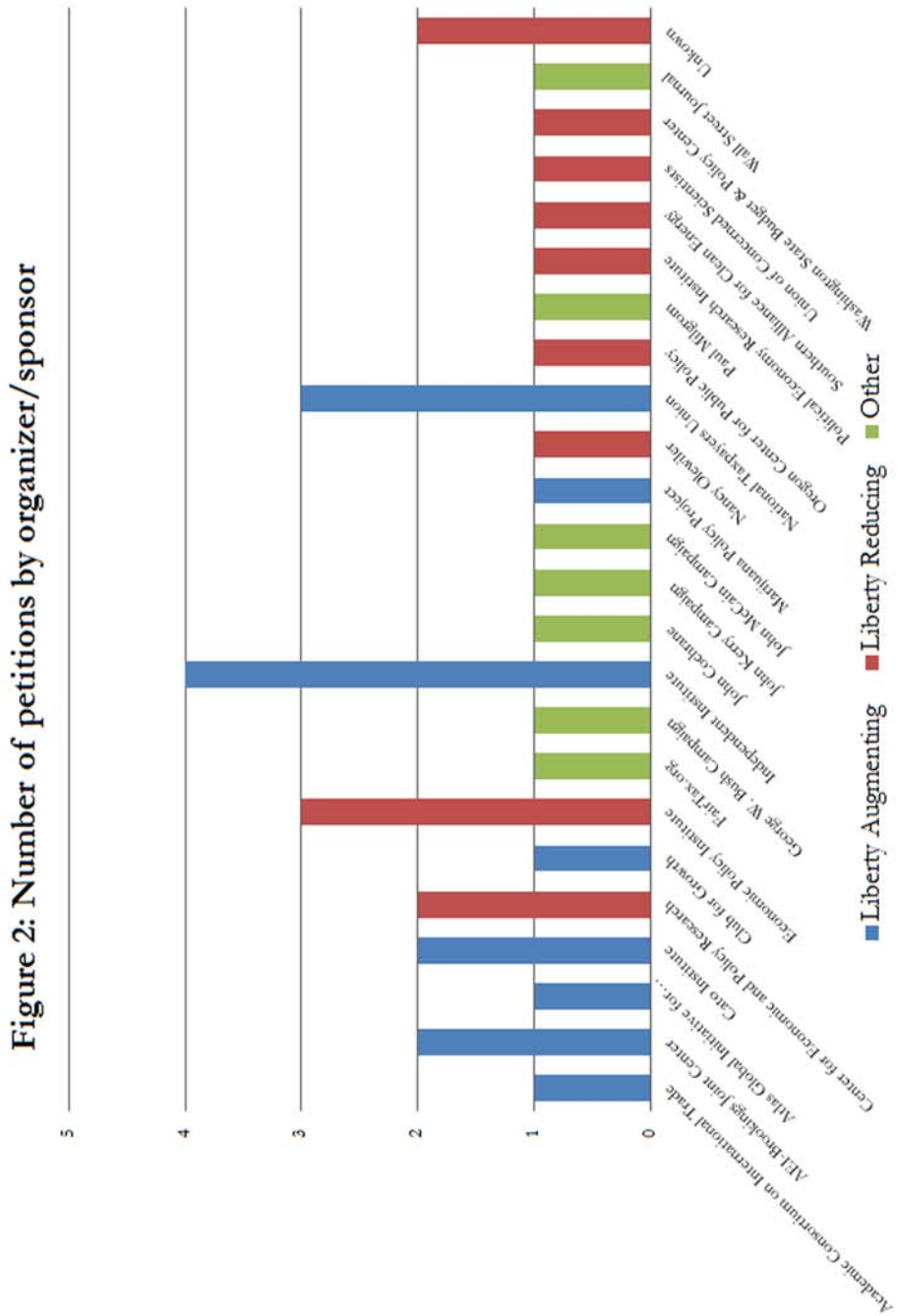


Figure 3: Number of signatures by petition type

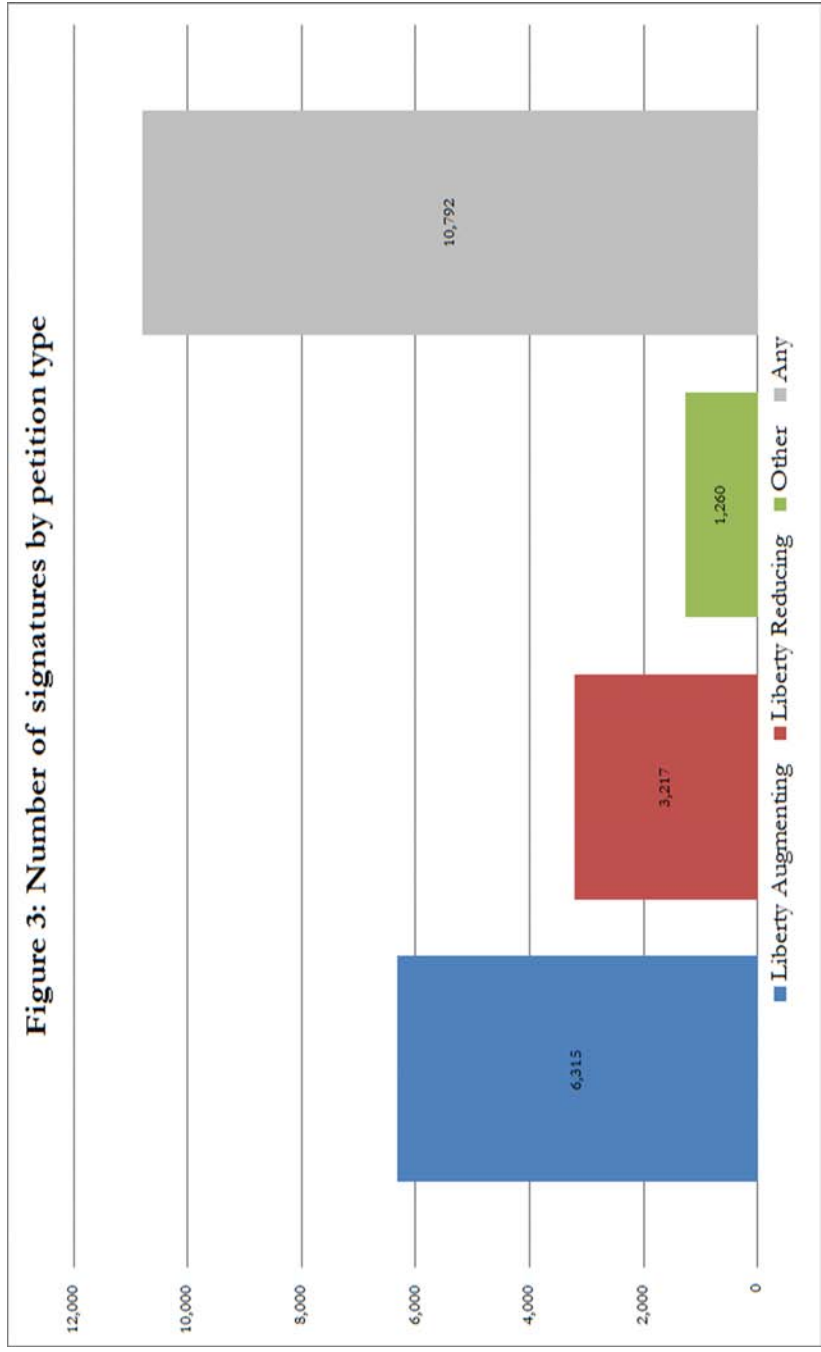


Figure 4: Number of unique signatories by petition type

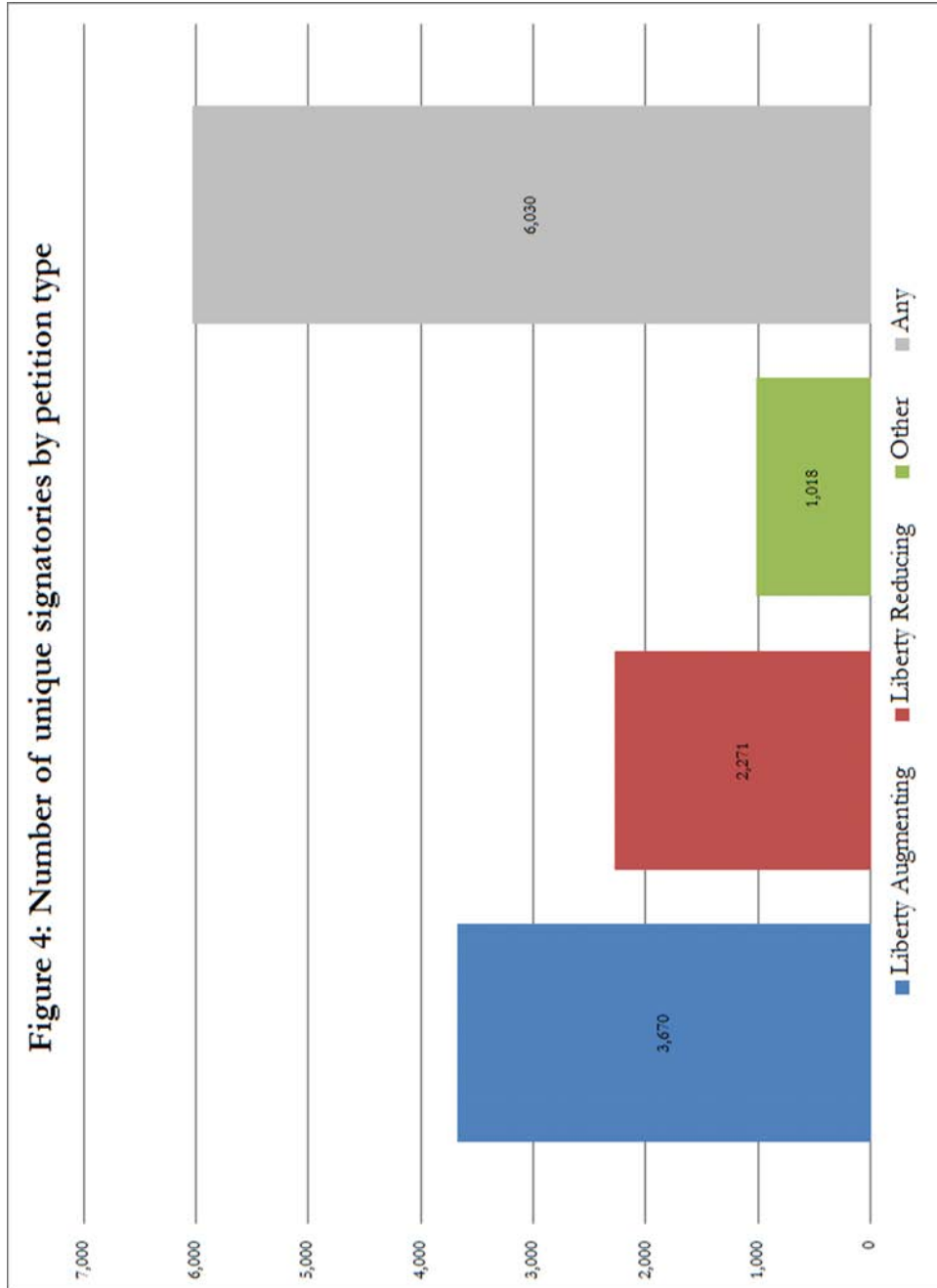


Figure 5 (1st of 2 panels): Individuals who signed at least 9 petitions

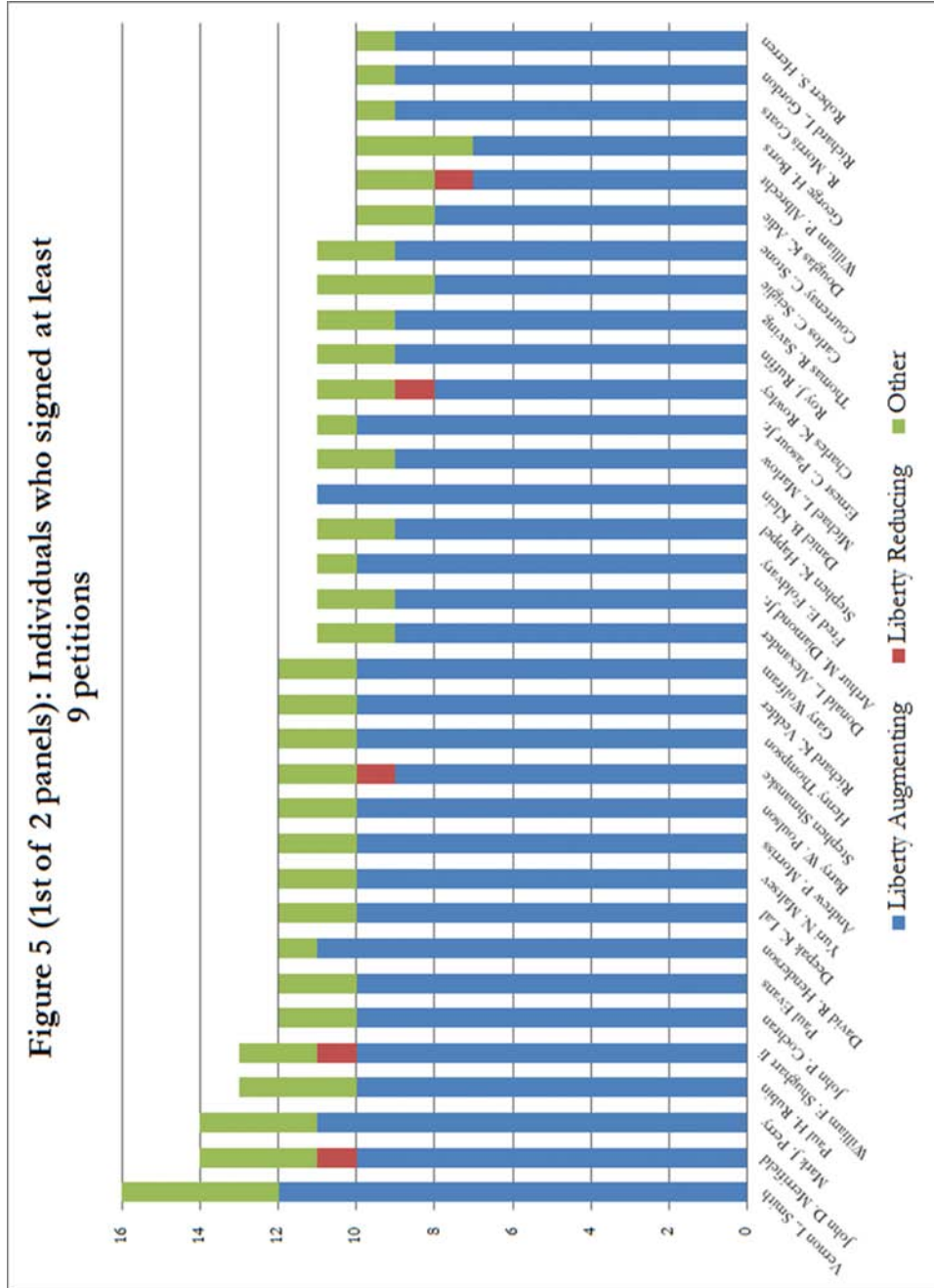


Figure 5 (2nd of 2 panels): Individuals who signed at least 9 petitions

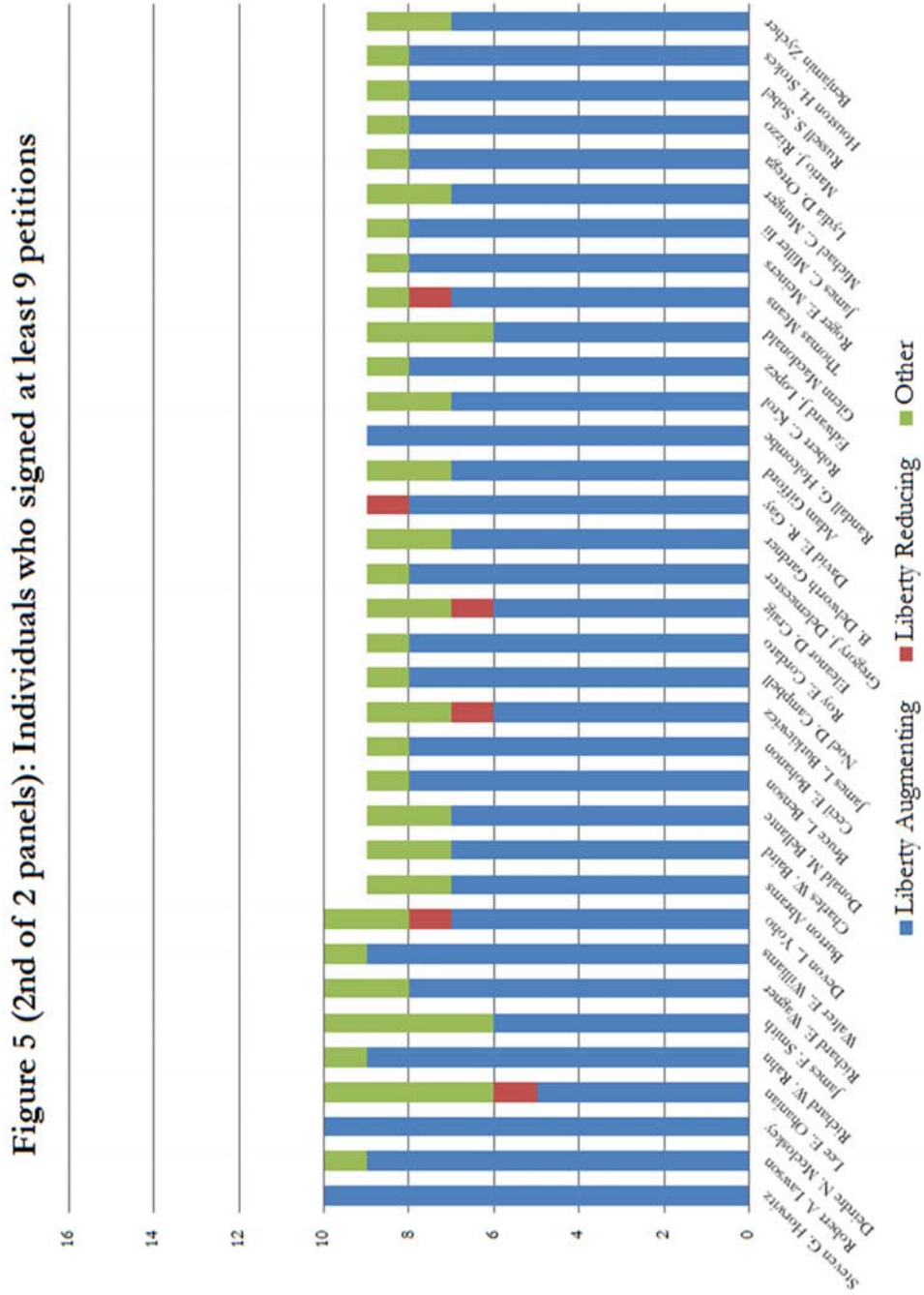


Figure 6 (1st of 2 panels): Individuals who signed at least 8 liberty-augmenting petitions

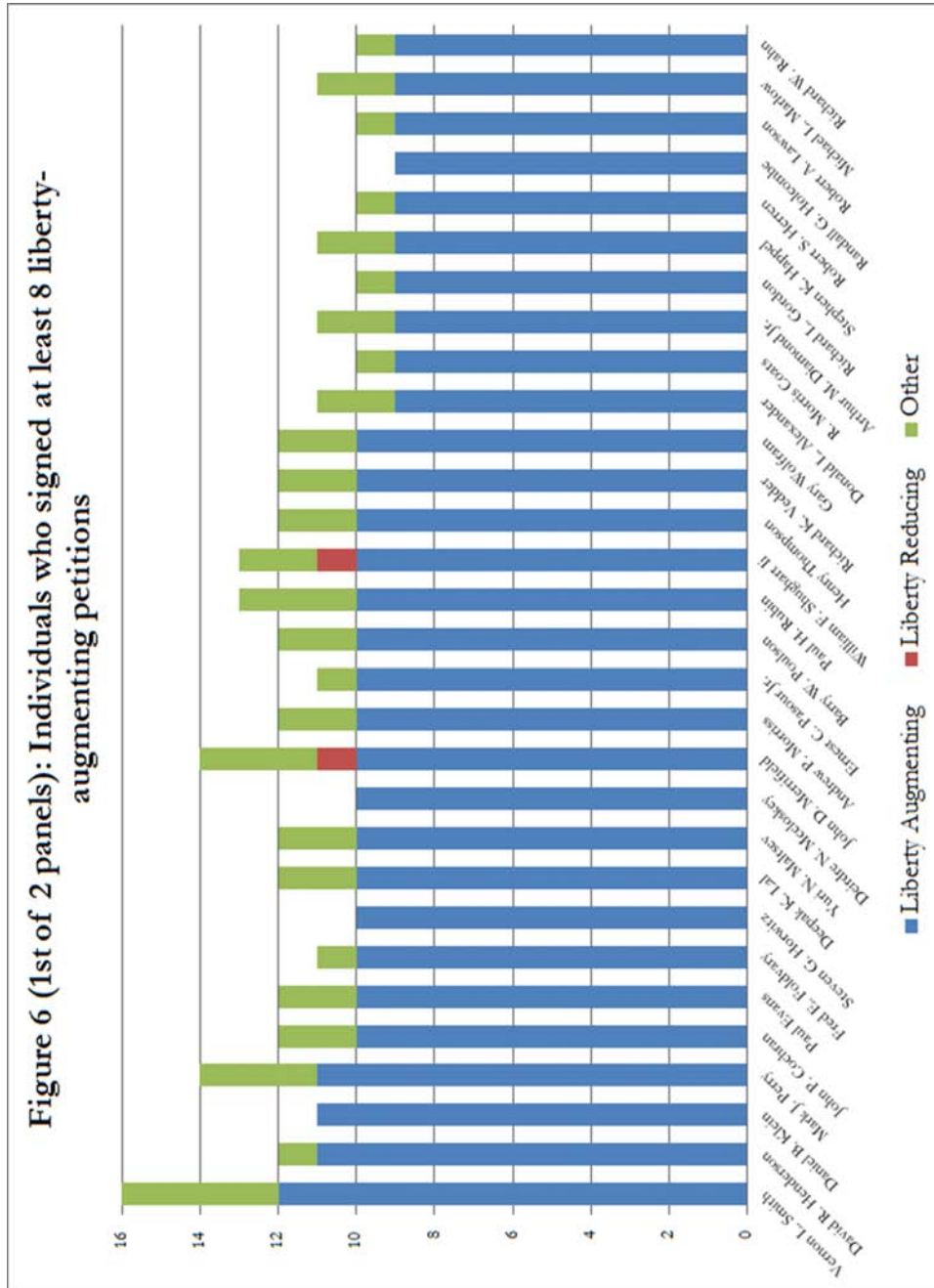


Figure 6 (2nd of 2 panels): Individuals who signed at least 8 liberty-augmenting petitions

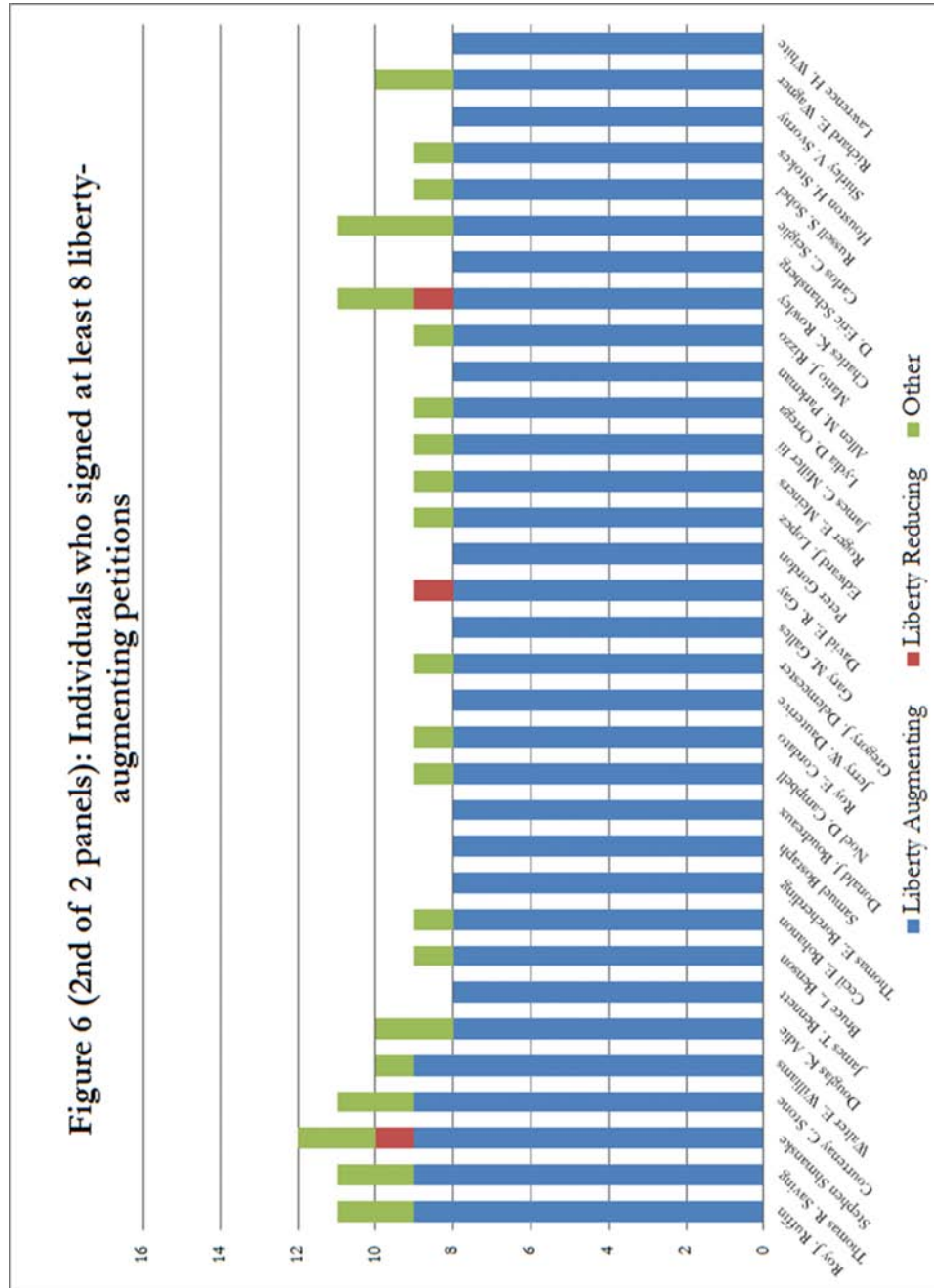


Figure 7 (2nd of 3 panels): Individuals who signed at least 4 liberty-reducing petitions

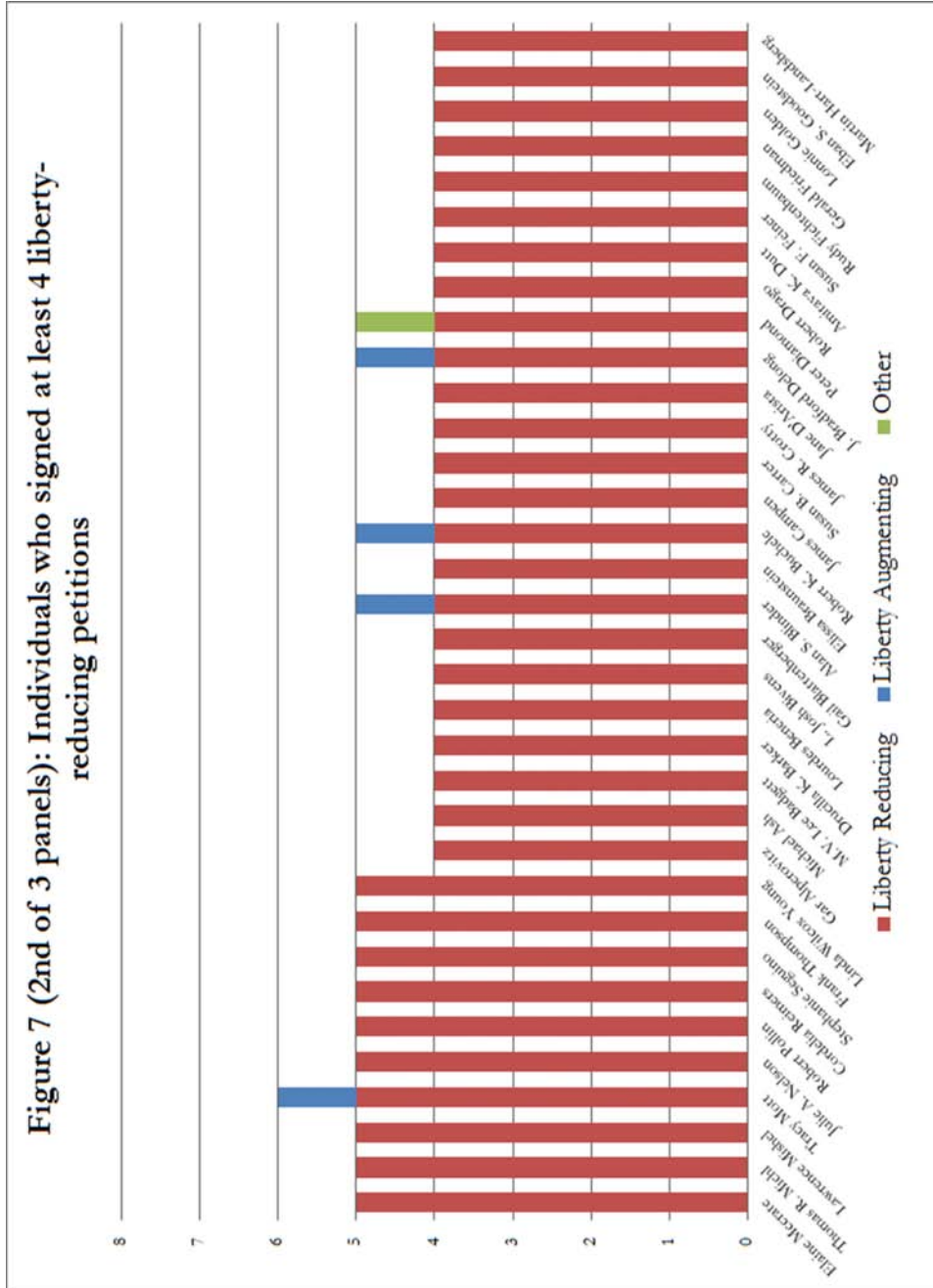


Figure 8: Nobel laureates

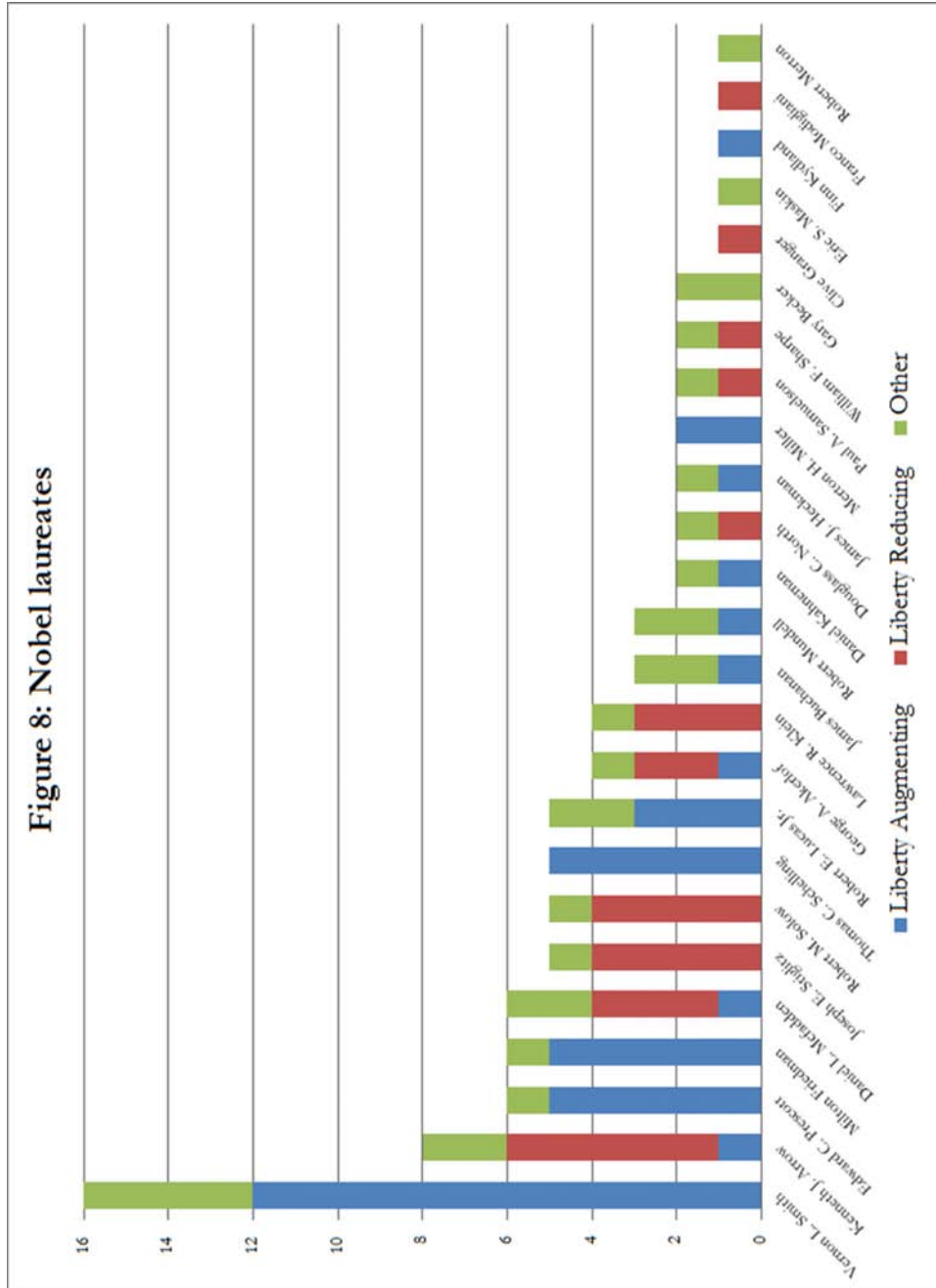


Figure 9 (1st of 2 panels): Notable economists

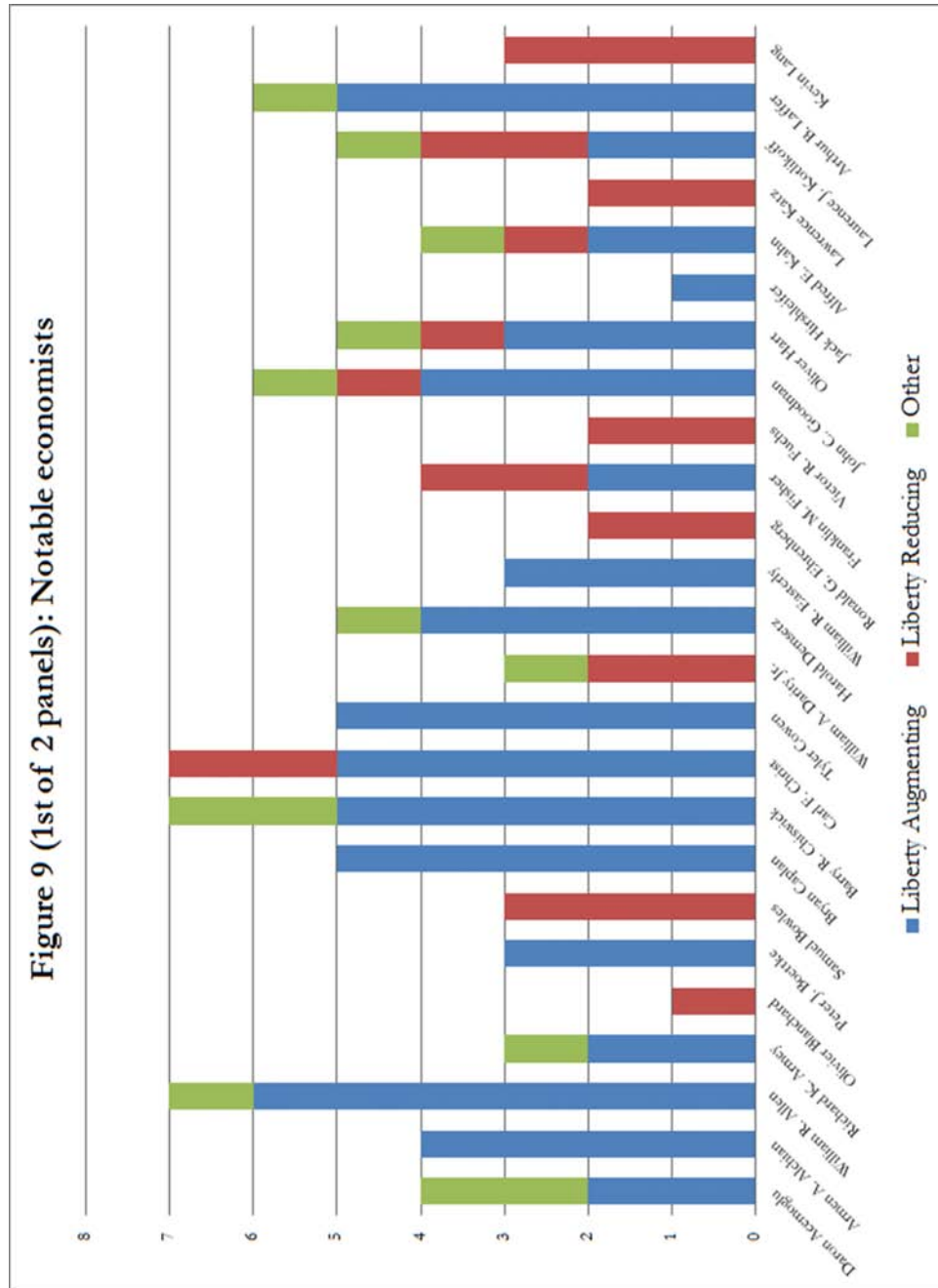


Figure 9 (2nd of 2 panels): Notable economists

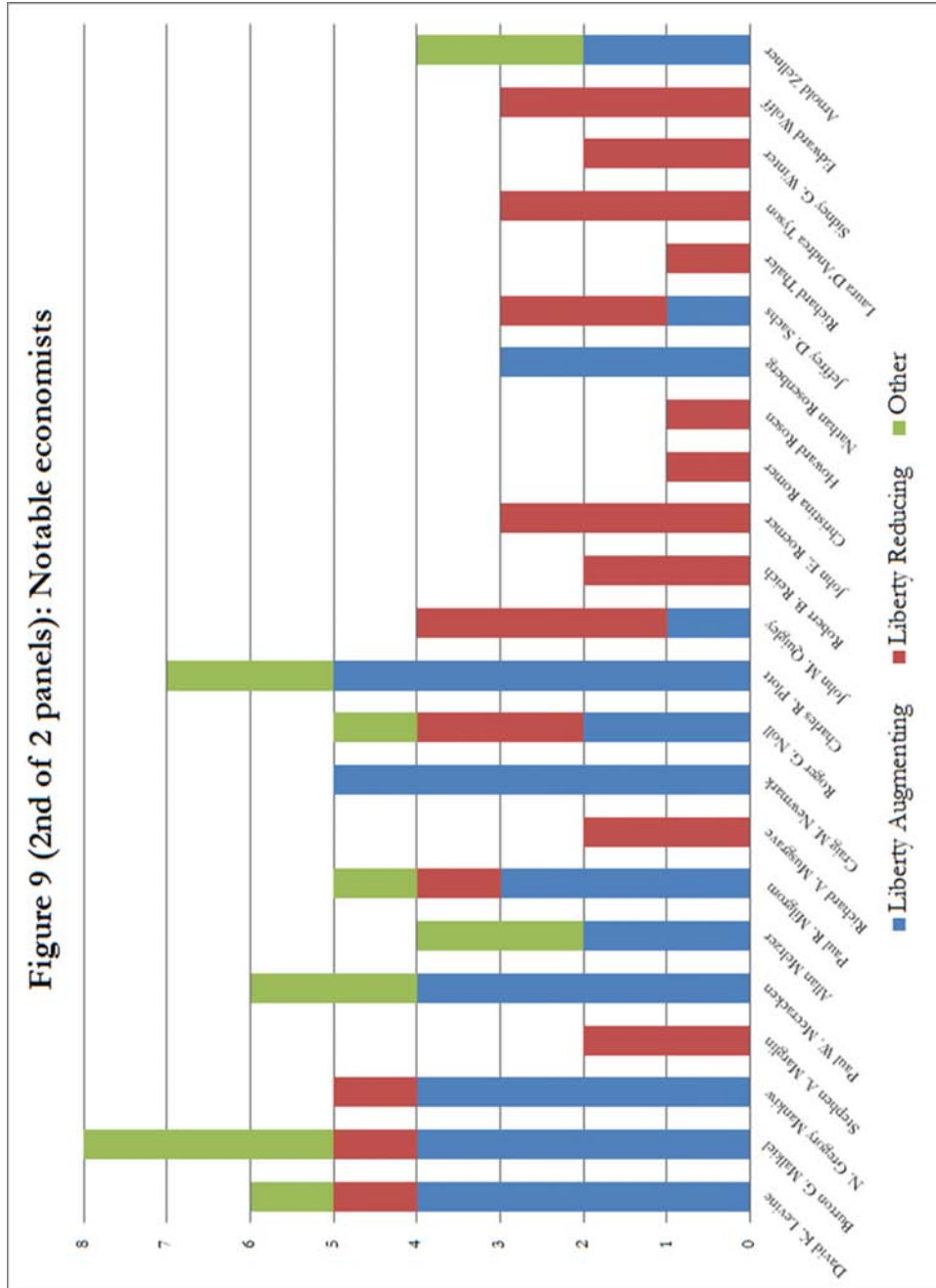


Figure 10: Number of signatures by gender

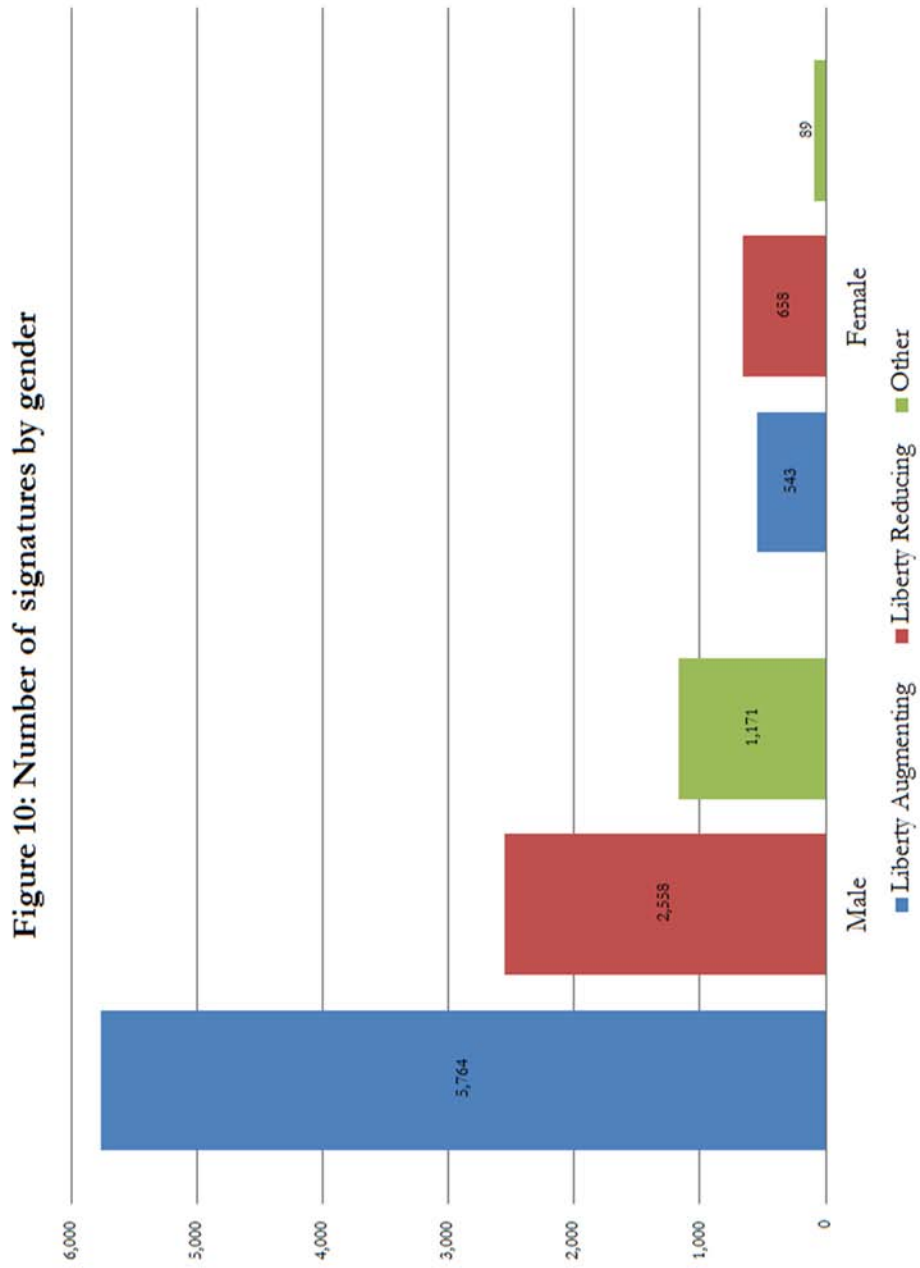


Figure 11: 25 institutions by most signatures

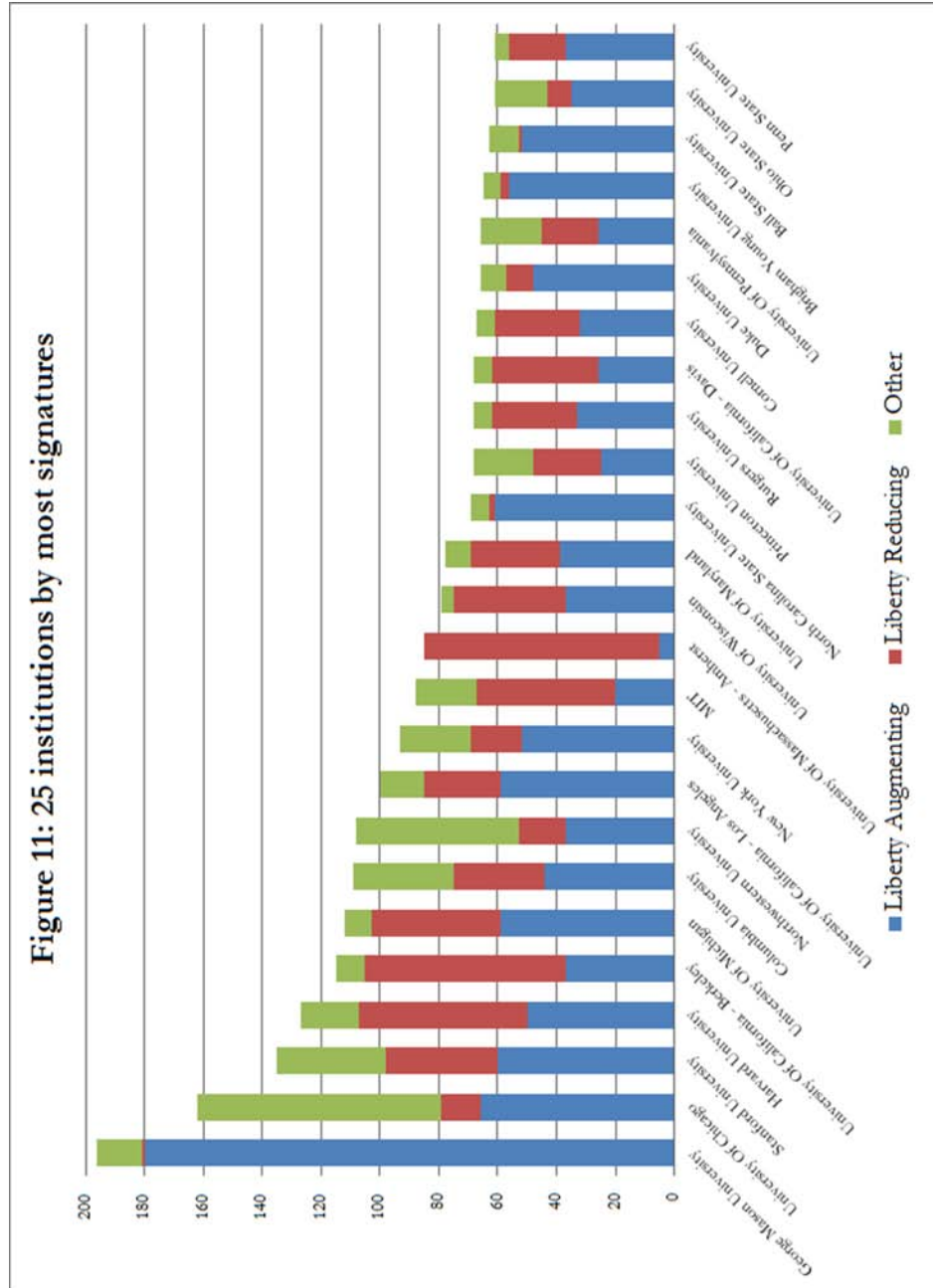


Figure 12: 25 institutions by most liberty-augmenting signatures

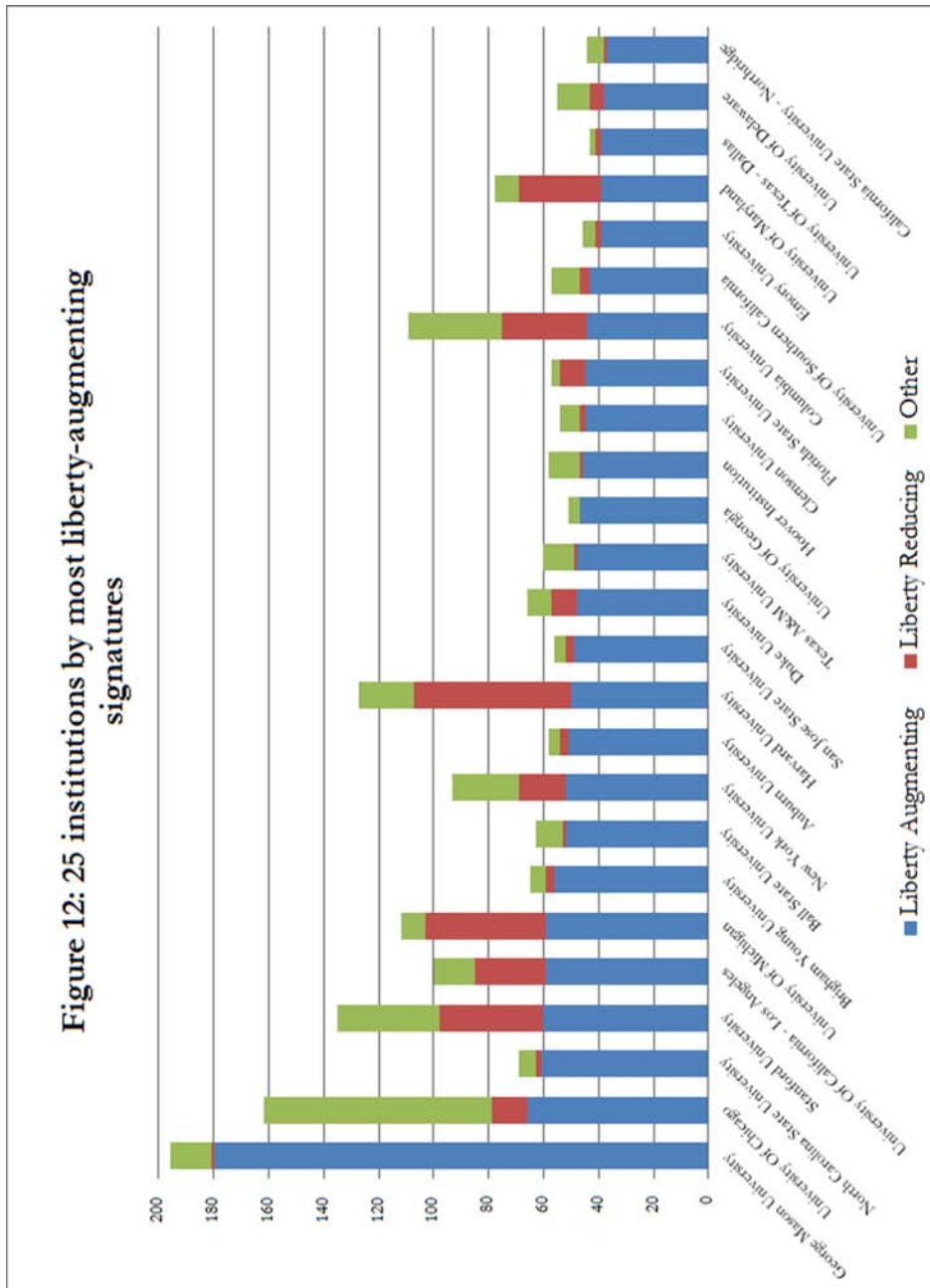


Figure 13: 25 institutions by most liberty-reducing signatures

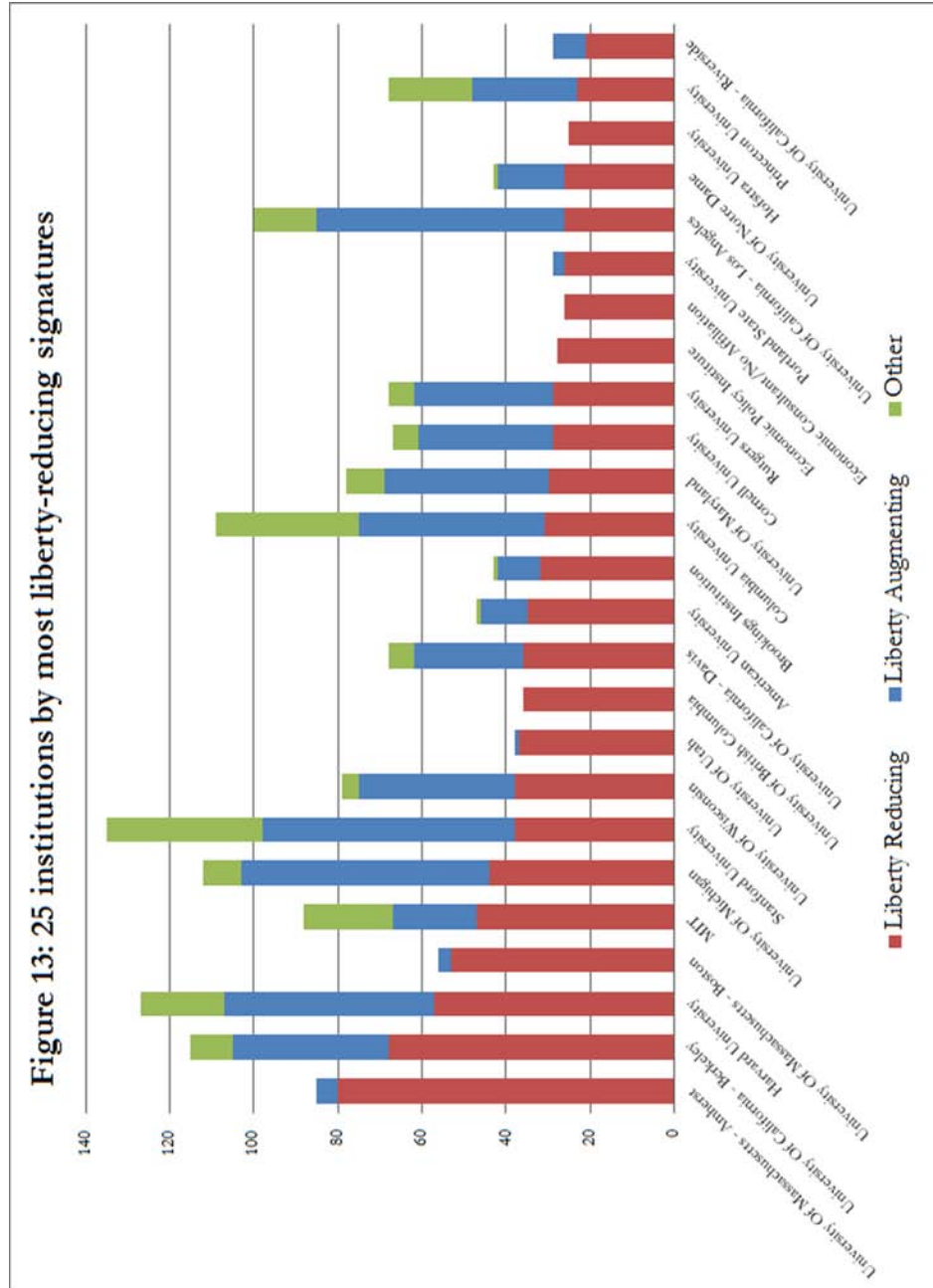


Figure 14: 25 institutions by highest liberty-augmenting quotient

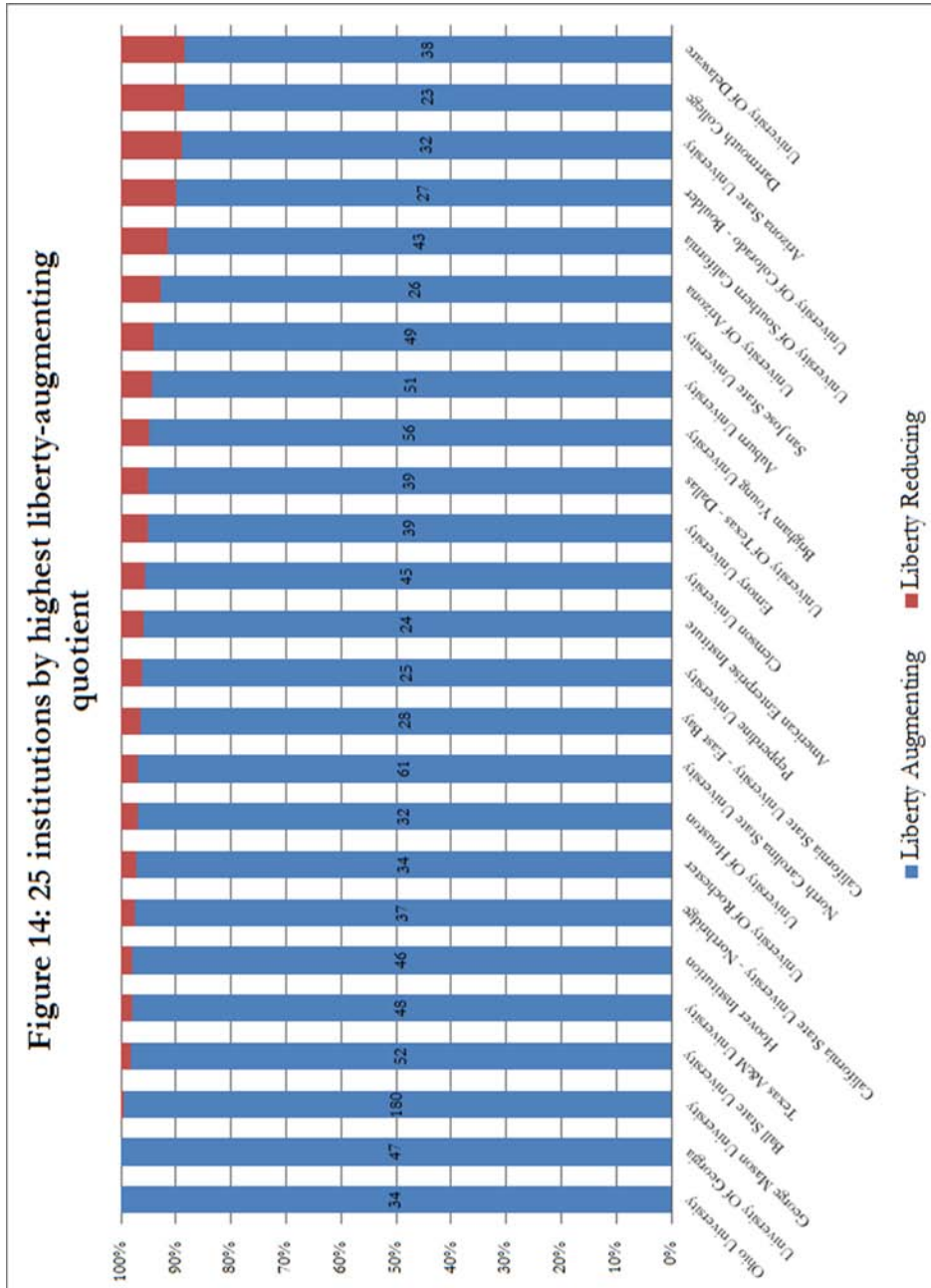


Figure 15: 25 institutions by highest liberty-reducing quotient

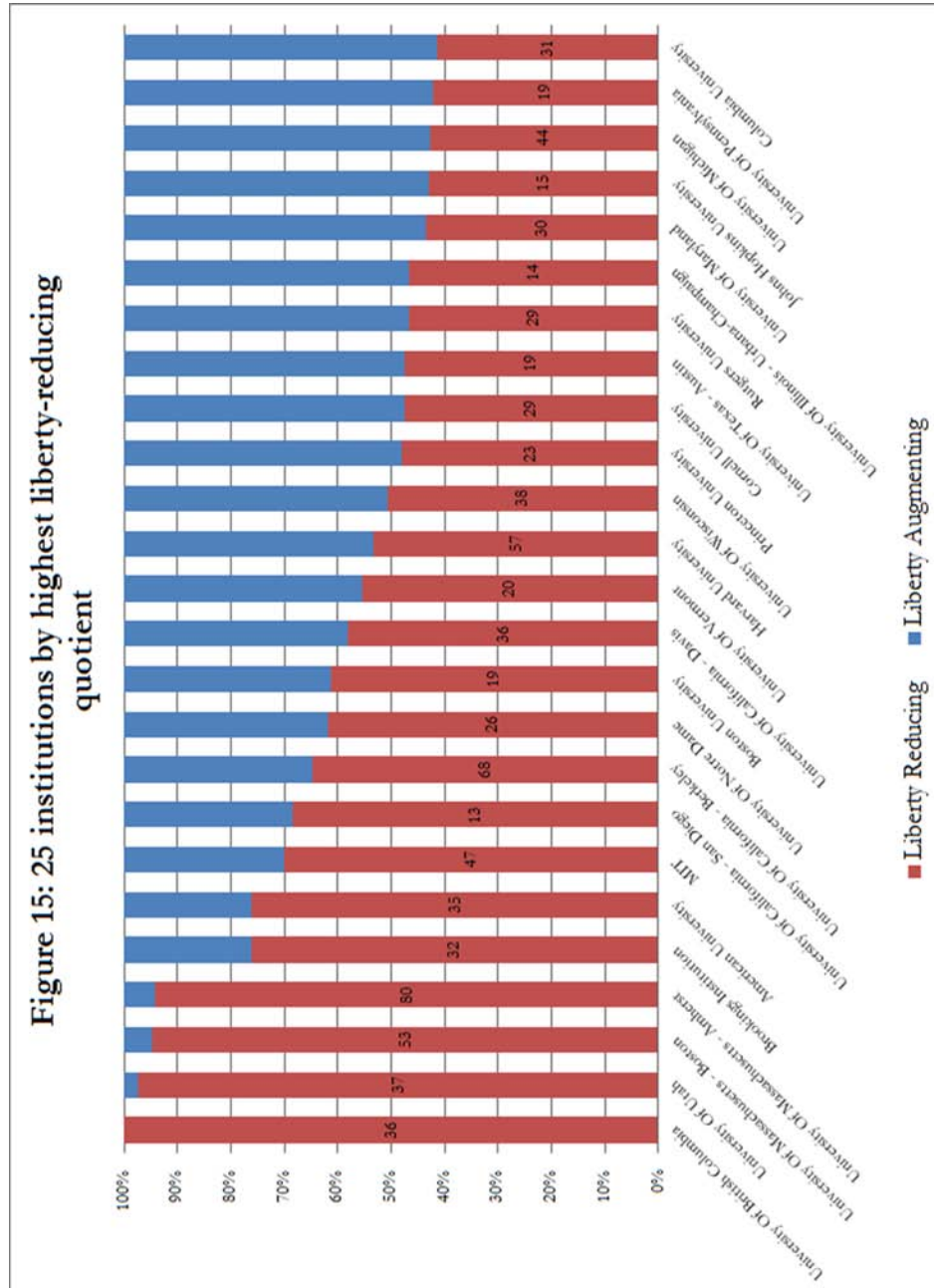


Figure 16: Signatures by top 25 economics departments (US News and World Report ranking)

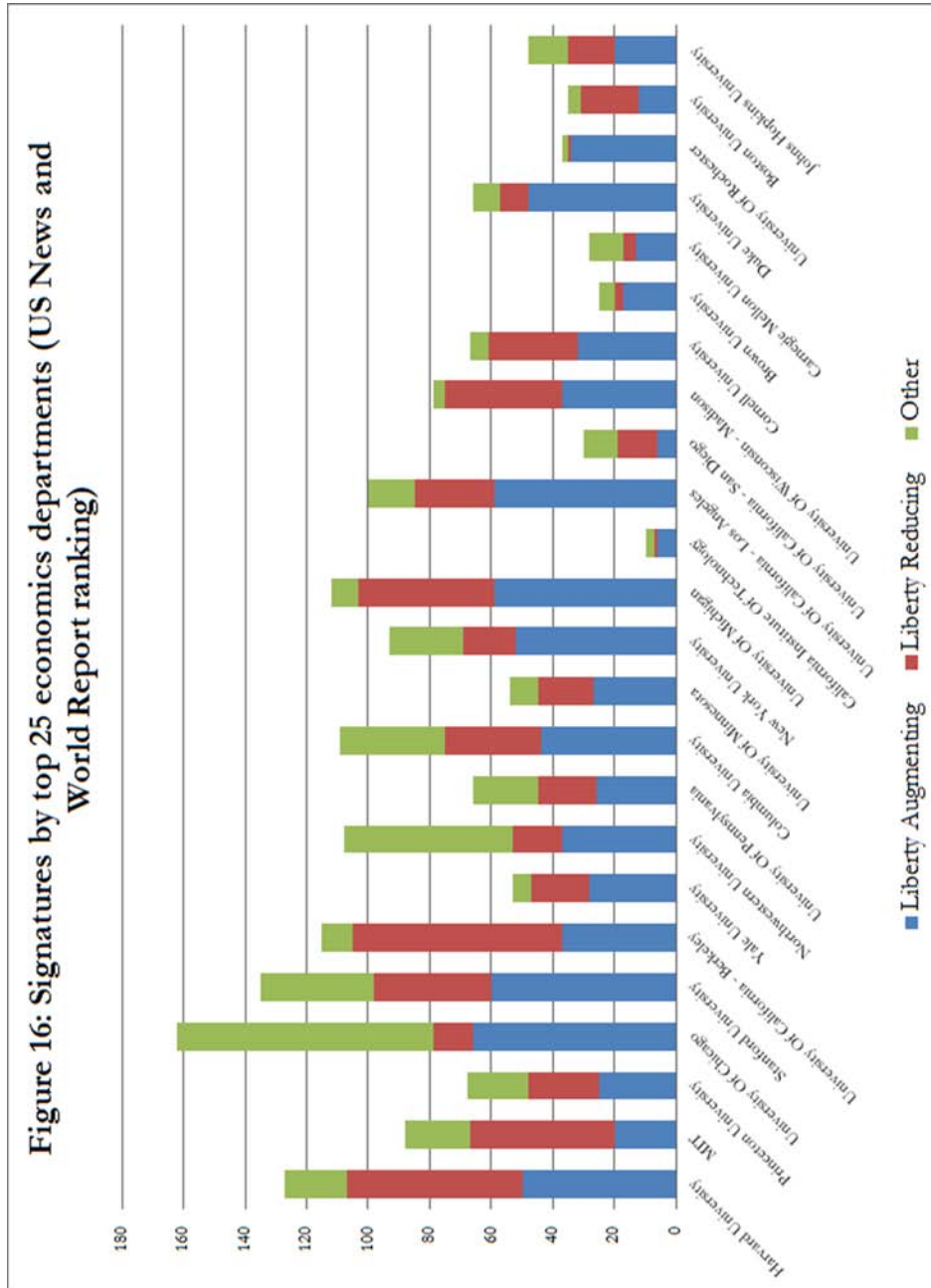
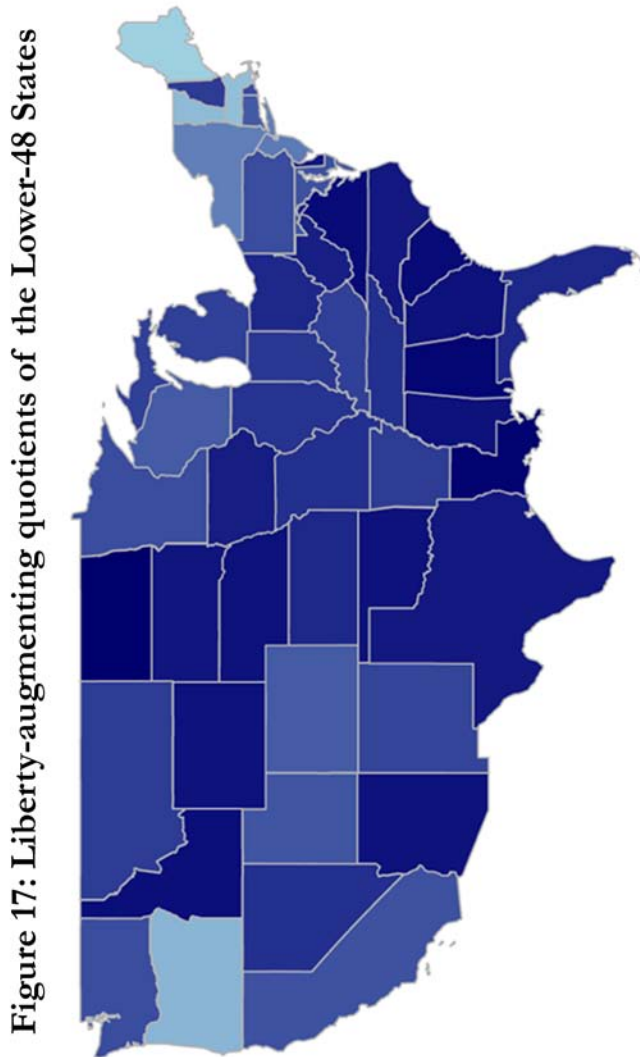


Figure 17: Liberty-augmenting quotients of the Lower 48 States



Appendices

Appendix 1: Excel file containing all signature data: [Link](#)

Appendix 2: PDF containing text of all 35 petitions: [Link](#)

Appendix 3: SAS codes for generating the figures contained in this paper: [Link](#)

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