



Who's winning the military vote? This year, it's not Hillary or Trump

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For decades, the GOP has claimed to uniquely represent American military personnel. With that in mind, the newly anointed GOP presidential nominee, Donald Trump, has wasted no time in criticizing the foreign policy legacies of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

While service members aren't allowed to become publicly involved in partisan politics, they do speak indirectly via polls and campaign contributions. And it turns out this year they favor neither Democrats nor Republicans. Rather, they lean libertarian. A plurality this campaign season is supporting the least militaristic of the candidates: Libertarian Party nominee Gary Johnson.

The Libertarian Party is a perennial and distant third-place contender, but this election might be different. Johnson has been polling in double digits and could sway the balance of power, especially with the help of military personnel.

A July poll found Johnson well ahead of the two major-party candidates among military voters, with almost 39 percent of active duty members backing him. Just 31 percent supported Donald Trump, and only 14 percent were for Hillary Clinton. Johnson carried every service except the Navy.

He enjoyed the biggest margin in the Marine Corps, 44 percent to 27 percent for Trump. Second was the Air Force, which supported him 39 percent to 30 percent. Johnson also carried former members of the military and came close among retirees. Clinton typically lagged behind Johnson and Trump, sometimes receiving barely a third of Johnson's share.

This isn't the first time a libertarian has led the presidential race among military personnel. In 2012, Republican Ron Paul had "more financial support from active duty members of the service than any other politician," according to Timothy Egan in the New York Times. Paul is a consistent outlier on foreign policy, highlighting the problems of "blowback" — terrorism as a response to Washington's persistent willingness to bomb, invade and occupy other nations and drone and bomb other peoples — while the other candidates mostly stumped for more war.

At one point, Paul had collected 87 percent of the military contributions for GOP candidates. As of March 2012, Paul had received more than twice the amount for Obama, almost 10 times the amount for Romney, more than 10 times as much as Gingrich and about 32 times the amount for Rick Santorum, a former senator. The latter three were inveterate war hawks who themselves never served in the military. In contrast, Obama presented himself as a critic of unnecessary war.

After Mitt Romney effectively wrapped up the GOP race, military personnel shifted their financial support, but they supported Obama, not Romney. It turns out that when GOP candidates beat the war drums, they ended up competing for votes from the ivory tower rather than the armed services. In March 2012, Obama collected about twice as much cash as Paul, who in turn received twice as much as Romney.

While service personnel are willing to serve in combat, most do not want to do so absent compelling justifications. And few of the interests involved in Washington's recent conflicts can be considered serious, let alone vital. A Marine Corps veteran told Egan that service members "realize they're being utilized for other purposes — nation building and being world's policeman — and it's not what they signed up for."

Who can keep Americans safe? That obviously is one of the most important questions of this election, and uniformed military personnel are giving a clear, but surprising, answer.

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