



## Libertarian Party eyes 2016 as breakthrough year

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Libertarian Party members are brimming with optimism about their prospects in 2016 as they prepare to nominate a presidential candidate at a convention in Orlando over the weekend.

Many Libertarians feel emboldened by a sense that 2016 could be a breakthrough year for the perpetually underachieving third party in its quest to smash the two-party grip on the political system.

Libertarians point to polls that show an appetite for a third-party candidate, as well as deep dissatisfaction with the likely major-party candidates, Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The Libertarian nominee is likely to be on the ballot in all 50 states, and members feel that their socially liberal and fiscally conservative doctrine is in line with a majority of the electorate and primed to draw interest from the growing contingent of registered independents, as well as disaffected Republicans and Democrats.

The unpredictable political climate that has led to the rise of insurgents or outsiders like Trump and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders has provoked upheaval in both major parties, leading to what Libertarian Party leaders are describing as unprecedented interest in their cause.

According to Federal Election Commission filings analyzed by The Hill, the Libertarian National Committee took in \$205,000 in April, its largest monthly haul since 2004.

“We are seeing a surge of support monetarily, and new memberships are skyrocketing,” said Nicholas Sarwark, the chairman of the Libertarian National Committee.

“In previous conventions, if you wanted to attend from Ohio and you couldn’t get a delegate spot in Ohio, there would be plenty of delegations with open seats you could fill. This time around, it’s crazy. We will approach our theoretical maximum.”

Gary Johnson, the former two-term Republican governor of deep-blue New Mexico, is the favorite to win the nomination. He was also the party’s standard-bearer in 2012, when he won 1.3 million votes.

Johnson has formed an alliance with former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, who hopes to serve as Johnson's vice presidential candidate, although the party elects its presidential and vice presidential candidates separately.

David Boaz, the executive vice president for the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute and author of the book "The Libertarian Mind," said a Johnson-Weld ticket could be a game-changer for a party that needs to be taken seriously above all else.

"Having a successful two-term governor for president and a successful two-term governor for vice president would lend the kind of credibility that you don't typically see with third-party candidates," Boaz said. "Together, they'd likely have more public-sector governing experience than either the Republican or Democratic ticket."

But all of the delegates to the convention will arrive unbound, so neither man is a lock to win on Sunday in a party known for its fierce independent streak.

The increased focus on the process could give an additional level of volatility at the convention. Sarwark said about 600 to 700 delegates attend in a normal presidential year.

He's expecting at least 1,000 this year, plus at least 300 alternates and about 500 independent observers.

Missouri businessman Austin Petersen has mounted a credible challenge to Johnson. He has a big online presence and this week won the endorsement of veteran GOP strategist Mary Matalin, an adviser to both Bush administrations who recently switched her party affiliation from Republican to Libertarian.

Petersen is a rare anti-abortion Libertarian who believes he's best positioned to attract support from Republicans.

"I will be the only pro-Constitution, limited-government conservative on the ballot," he told The Hill.

Software entrepreneur John McAfee is also in the mix. But McAfee, who talks openly about his past hard drug use and life on the lam in Guatemala, is viewed by many as a gadfly who has glommed on to the party for his own purposes.

The first order of business for the eventual nominee will be getting into the polls, with the aim of making it to the debate stage. A presidential cycle without representation at one of the debates would be a huge letdown for Libertarians.

The Commission on Presidential Debates, which Johnson is suing, requires candidates to poll at 15 percent in several national surveys leading up to the debate.

That's a challenge because the major pollsters don't always include the names of third-party candidates in their surveys.

That could change in 2016 if pollsters continue to find an appetite among the public for an alternative to Trump and Clinton, who are set to enter the general election as two of the most unpopular presidential candidates in modern times.

Already this cycle, a Monmouth University survey has found Johnson at 11 percent support, while Fox News and Morning Consult polls released this week have put him at 10 percent support in hypothetical three-way match-ups against Trump and Clinton.

That's tantalizingly close to the 15 percent threshold. But in addition to improving his standing, Johnson, or any Libertarian candidate, will need the pollsters to include them consistently — not just on occasion as a one-off novelty.

An NBC News survey released this week is emblematic of the frustrations Libertarians have with pollsters. The poll found that 47 percent of voters would consider supporting a third-party candidate — but it didn't include the names of any potential alternatives.

Regardless, the surprising polling numbers for Johnson before he's even won the nomination have been enough to create media interest around his candidacy, his campaign said.

"We're getting absolutely flooded with media requests," said Johnson campaign spokesman John Vaught LaBeaume. "It's unprecedented for the Libertarian Party candidate to be taken this seriously by the national press, and it's a sign of the potential we have to impact this race."

The media interest is important, as coverage can lead to fundraising success and pressure to be included in the polls or on the debate stage.

Still, Johnson doesn't warrant the kind of minute-by-minute or even daily coverage that Trump and Clinton receive.

Libertarians interviewed by The Hill acknowledged that there's still a psychological barrier any third-party candidate has to overcome with an electorate and media conditioned to vote for and cover only the Republican and Democratic candidates.

And there's no guarantee Johnson or the Libertarian Party nominee's message will take hold.

Johnson, for instance, supports drug legalization and the elimination of corporate and personal income taxes. Those ideas could potentially be popular, but they're also radical and easily dismissed by critics as harmful or fanciful.

As such, expectations for the party heading into the general election are all over the board.

Johnson says he's running to win the White House and believes he can do that if he can just make it to the debate stage.

Others close to the movement said it would be a giant step forward just to be included in a debate. Some say it would be an enormous achievement to take 5 percent or more in the general election, as that would likely be enough to influence the outcome.

But Libertarians remain hopeful that an election year that has already produced Trump and Sanders holds one more surprise.

Sarwark likened the Trump vs. Clinton general election to a football game in which two teams you hate are playing against each other.

“We are offering the opportunity that they can both lose,” he said. “You can vote for the meteor to hit the stadium.”