



Libertarian Ticket Seeks Status as Viable Alternative to Clinton, Trump

Vaughn Hillyard

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As pundits and political operatives buzz over whether a well-funded, viable Independent candidate will enter the presidential race, there is already a third, alternative ticket to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump that will appear on ballots in all 50 states this November.

Gary Johnson and Bill Weld, newly minted as the Libertarian presidential ticket this weekend, are in pursuit of waging the most prominent third-party run in two decades.

"I wouldn't be doing this if there weren't the opportunity to win," Johnson said this weekend at the Libertarians' convention in Orlando. "I think we can make this happen."

Johnson ran nationally in 2012 yet garnered just one percent of the vote, but with heightened aversion toward the likely GOP and Democratic nominees, the former New Mexico governor - and his running mate, Weld, the former Republican governor of Massachusetts - is aiming to hit the threshold of 15 percent support in national polls that should launch him onto the debate stage this fall.

"That's our initial goal," said Ron Nielson, the campaign's senior adviser, noting: "It'll be a mass communication type effort - we're talking about earned media and social media. The Libertarian Party doesn't have the infrastructure that the Republicans or Democrats have."

They're hoping for the type of free media received by Trump and the grassroots, social media hurricane whipped up by Bernie Sanders this last year.

After winning the nomination in Orlando this weekend, Johnson's team took off for New York City, where the ticket is appearing on multiple television outlets.

"We do have the opportunity to reach millions and millions of Americans," Johnson told the convention delegates this weekend. Johnson touted the ticket's national television interviews and zeroed in on Weld's extensive fundraising network that has yielded, Johnson said, nearly \$250 million over his political career.

David Boaz, the executive vice president of the Libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, questioned why prominent conservatives like Bill Kristol, Sen. Ben Sasse and Mitt Romney,

whom all have remained forceful in their "Never Trump" positions, are not rallying around the bid of the former Republican governors.

"They make the case Trump is unfit to be president and Hillary is either unfit or strikingly wrong on everything," Boaz said. "So therefore, your alternative is a respected, honest governor (Johnson) with whom you disagree with on abortion, gay marriage and marijuana."

Money matters

Multiple donors who spoke with Weld said the vice presidential nominee is aiming to raise a minimum of \$30 million, and with major Republican donors hesitant to fund Trump, the campaign sees opportunities to tap into a substantial pool of funds.

"Our plan is to talk to the campaign and see if they have a convincing plan - we're inclined to support them," said Paul Jost, who, with his wife Laura, donated \$500,000 toward a super PAC supporting Rand Paul last year."

"There are a lot of disaffected Republicans who are unhappy with the choice we have," Laura Jost added.

Asked if he would be all right with Johnson costing Trump the election, Paul Jost said, "It wouldn't bother me - [Trump] is completely unfit to be president and my last choice."

Jean Claude Gruffat, a Republican from New York who traveled to Orlando to meet with Johnson and Weld, said he will "absolutely" solicit donations, beginning this week, for Johnson. Gruffat previously bundled roughly \$50,000 for Rand Paul's presidential campaign.

"I'm not sure they'll mount a credible bid - it's a challenge," Gruffat said. "But it's worth a try. I think this election is going to change the parties."

Matt Kibbe operated a super PAC that supported Rand Paul's presidential effort. The group raised nearly \$5.5 million. Kibbe is now considering launching a similar effort on behalf of Johnson and Weld.

"I think there will be a couple true believers that step up financially early, but they're going to have to break 15 percent - and I don't think they need that significant money to get to 15 percent," Kibbe said.

Ed Crane, the founder of the Cato Institute, is expected to refocus the attention of his super PAC, Purple PAC, to aiding the Libertarians' bid, as reported by Politico.

Nicholas Sarwark, the chair of the Libertarian Party, said on Sunday "there are backchannel communications to reach out" to Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers who donated nearly \$400 million to Republican efforts in 2012. David Koch ran as the vice presidential candidate on the Libertarian ticket in 1980.

Kibbe rejected the notion that the Johnson-Weld candidacy hinges on the Kochs: "I think Gary Johnson has viability without David Koch coming in with \$20 million."

A non-battleground map

The campaign intends to target "non-battleground states," including New Hampshire, Utah, Montana, New Mexico and Alaska, where, Nielson said, "other political campaigns haven't saturated the market." The campaign said the pair will travel across the country, however, and often separately. The campaign anticipates holding campaign rallies later this summer and will skip running television ads unless it raises significant funds. Nielson said it will run a "lean machine," likely adding staff in key states.

While the Libertarian duo provide an alternative to Trump and Clinton, the policy positions taken away from the convention may very well be hard for traditional Republican and Democratic voters to reconcile with.

For liberals, Johnson refused this weekend to definitively say climate change is man-made, suggested he'd abolish the Department of Education, opposed the minimum wage, defended his support of concealed carry laws, said he would sign "any legislation reducing taxes," and told the crowd that "healthcare is a tax" on Americans.

Conservatives, meanwhile, would have to accept a candidate who has been a longtime advocate for the legalization of marijuana, gay marriage and stated clearly he supports "the woman making the most difficult choice" of whether to have an abortion.

Though a rather Zen, temperate figure, Johnson told reporters on Sunday afternoon he'd "absolutely" go on offense against Trump, specifically targeting him for his "really racist" immigration policies.

Asked this weekend by a reporter whether Trump is an authoritarian figure, Johnson paused for two seconds before giving a chuckle and responding into the microphone: "Yeah."