



Kingmaker? Libertarian Gary Johnson poised to influence Trump-Clinton outcome

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WASHINGTON—Libertarian Party conventions are reliably good for a laugh. This year's gathering in Orlando featured a stripping candidate, an ex-fugitive candidate who once lived with a harem of young women, and a candidate who argued that 5-year-olds have the right to shoot heroin unsupervised.

And then things got really bizarre. The Libertarian Party nominated two experienced executives.

Sure, they aren't exactly conventional politicians. Presidential nominee Gary Johnson, twice-elected former governor of New Mexico, is an Everest-climbing marijuana smoker who once ran a company called Cannabis Sativa Inc. Vice-presidential nominee William Weld, twice-elected former governor of Massachusetts, is a Grateful Deadhead who once jumped fully clothed into a river to celebrate an anti-pollution law.

But they both boast a record of government achievement. And they have a real chance, in this unconventional year, to earn enough votes to affect whether it is Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton who takes the White House.

"The Libertarians have a ticket with 14 years of public-sector executive experience, which is 14 more years than Trump and Clinton combined. That, I think, puts it in a different category than any third-party campaign I can remember," said David Boaz, executive vice-president at the libertarian Cato Institute. "Whatever criticism you may have of them — they're not libertarian enough, they're not dealing with the problems America has to face, whatever — you can't say they're unserious."

Serious or not, the Libertarian ticket is almost always irrelevant. Since the party's founding in 1971, none of its presidential candidates have received more than 1 per cent of the vote. But this election presents a rare opening: Trump is the most disliked nominee of the modern era; Clinton is second-most disliked.

More than a third of voters, polls suggest, are now willing to consider a third party. The Libertarians, unlike Jill Stein's Green Party, will qualify for the ballot in every state.

"They cannot win. That's not going to happen. But can they be kingmakers by drawing a few percentage points in close races, maybe Florida and Ohio? Yes," said Larry Jacobs, a University of Minnesota political science professor.

Johnson got just 1 per cent when he ran in 2012 with a little-known judge. He is now between 7 per cent and 11 per cent even though most Americans still don't know who he is.

Johnson, 63, is offering a platform eclectic enough to both attract and turn off voters of all stripes. He wants legal abortion, free trade, no more income tax, visas instead of deportations for illegal immigrants, few restrictions on guns, and a non-interventionist foreign policy.

Johnson has angered some libertarian ideologues by adopting positions out of sync with the dogma of a movement that generally opposes government dictates. In January, he briefly endorsed a ban on the Muslim burqa. He supports anti-discrimination laws that deny businesses the freedom to refuse services to gay people.

“Is he as libertarian as a libertarian philosopher? No,” said Boaz. “But that’s because he’s running as a real-world candidate, not just an ideologue running as the nominee of an ideological party.”

Johnson’s support is likely to drop, Jacobs said, as voters get more serious about their decision and Bernie Sanders loyalists “come home” to Clinton. But presidential elections are usually so competitive that securing even 3 per cent of the vote could change the outcome.

So far, polls suggest Johnson is drawing votes about equally from Trump and Clinton. One poll of deep-red Utah put him at 13 per cent with Trump and Clinton tied at 35 per cent. In Pennsylvania, usually carried by the Democrats, Clinton is up 40 per cent to Trump’s 38 per cent with Johnson at 8 per cent.

“I thought I would be voting for a lesser of evils in this case. I think I’ve found a candidate I actually support,” said Missouri hospital chaplain Alan Amos, 50, a Republican-leaning independent who stumbled upon Johnson last week.

Johnson supporter Mose Dunkel, a Republican logger and former mayoral candidate in a small Idaho town, thinks Trump is an unqualified authoritarian who is unfairly derogatory to Mexicans and Muslims. He opposes abortion, but he appreciates Johnson’s fiscal conservatism and live-and-let-live philosophy.

“A lot of Democrats and a lot of Republicans should be able to see a lot of things they like about him,” said Dunkel, 40.

Johnson may not be quite ready for prime time. His speaking style can be awkward, and he dismayed some supporters with a halting performance in a CNN town hall last week. He has drawn attention but also criticism for referring to Trump as a “pussy,” and he

frequently prefaces policy discussions with boasts about his athletic feats.

But he remains Not Trump and Not Clinton, and he is already within striking distance of the magic number for third-party candidates: 15 per cent, which would grant him entry into the debates. Johnson devotees recall the debate appearances that propelled independent candidate [Ross Perot](#) to a 19 per cent finish.

“We think once he’s on the debate stage,” said Conner Owsley, 18, a soon-to-be-former Republican in California, “you’ll have Hillary and Trump trying to slit each other’s throats and Gary Johnson being that reasonable third voice.”

Libertarian presidential candidate, beacon of reasonableness. Weirder things have happened in 2016.