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Was Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgensen a 'spoiler' for Trump?

Results reveal Jorgensen's vote share was higher than the Trump-Biden margins in some states – but did she really take votes from Trump?

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Jorgensen reportedly said that many of her supporters were 'recovering Democrats' who want US troops brought home from abroad, as well as Republicans tired with federal spending.

Photograph: Paul Hennessy/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

When it became increasingly clear that a handful of battleground states would decide the winner in 2020's US presidential election, many were struck by the razor-thin margins that emerged.

The results also revealed a striking data point: Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgensen's share of the vote in some of these states was higher than margins between Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Before Biden became president-elect, this breakdown of ballots prompted questions whether Jorgensen – a third-party candidate who did not have a serious chance of winning in 2020 – drew votes away from Trump.

In the Republican stronghold of Georgia, which will award 16 electoral college votes, Biden presently bests Trump by fewer than 8,000 ballots. The percentage-based breakdown puts this into sharp relief: Biden has won 49.5% of the votes compared to Trump's 49.3%.

Jorgensen has won the remaining 1.2% – which now totals 61,792 votes. That number is more than seven times the Trump-Biden split there. The Associated Press has not yet called Georgia's results. On Friday, state officials announced a recount.

Numbers from Arizona, which the AP has already called in favor of Biden, are also noteworthy. With 90% of the vote counted, Biden holds 1,626,943 votes to Trump's 1,606,370 – a 49.6 to 48.9% divide. Jorgensen has landed 49,182 votes, or 1.5%. Arizona awards 11 electoral college votes.

In Wisconsin, which Trump won by 22,748 votes in 2016, Biden has been called as the winner, with 1,630,570 votes compared to his opponent's 1,610,030. Jorgensen got 38,415 votes, which is more than the difference between these candidates. Wisconsin has 10 electoral college votes.

That said, a vote for Jorgensen is not by any means necessarily a vote that Trump would have otherwise won.

Jorgensen herself doesn't believe she is responsible for Republicans' losses, and that the party's candidates are to blame.

"They should be mad at those candidates for not following through on their campaign promises," Jorgensen told the Greenville News, which is in her home state of South Carolina, earlier this week. She reportedly said that many of her supporters were "recovering Democrats" who want US troops brought home from abroad, as well as Republicans tired with federal spending.

"If I can get Republicans to start acting like Republicans and cutting the deficit. And if I can get the Democrats to go back to being the party of peace, bringing our troops home, and giving the average individual their rights? Then yes, I would be very pleased," she told the newspaper.

"In the personal conversations I had [on the campaign trail] a lot of people would say, 'Yeah, in 2016 I voted for Trump. I was so excited and then he didn't follow through on his promises.'"

Several experts do not believe Jorgensen was a Trump "spoiler" in 2020.

The Cato Institute's David Boaz, who has penned books on Libertarianism, told Reuters earlier this week: "We just don't know what would have happened if the Libertarians had not run a candidate."

He added: "Libertarians also get votes of people who just would not bother voting if they didn't have another choice."

Moreover, it's unclear which party is more heavily affected by Libertarian votes.

Kenneth Mayer, American politics professor at the University of Wisconsin, told Reuters earlier this week: "It's possible she played a role, but there is no way to know, and it doesn't matter. The results of the election are the results of the election."

Third-party candidates rarely impact overall election results. The 2000 Presidential election – where Ralph Nader won 97,000 votes in Florida, and George W Bush won this state by 537 votes – is a rare exception, Mayer said.

Neither Jorgensen nor the Libertarian party immediately responded to requests for comment.