



Libertarian spoiler in U.S. presidential election? Not a chance, experts say

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LAS VEGAS (Reuters) - The thin margins that separated U.S. President Donald Trump from Joe Biden in several swing states raised the question: Was the Republican incumbent hurt by the third-party run of Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgensen?

At midday Friday, the vote spreads between Biden and Trump in Georgia, Pennsylvania and Arizona were smaller than the number of votes Jorgensen won in those states. In Nevada and Wisconsin, Jorgensen's total plus the number who selected "none of the above" surpassed the gap.

It's tempting to assume Jorgensen's votes came at Trump's expense given past alliances between conservative Republicans and some Libertarians - not to mention the president recently said he considered himself "somewhat Libertarian."

But most analysts said that's simply not the case.

"We just don't know what would have happened if the Libertarians had not run a candidate," said David Boaz of the Cato Institute, who has authored books on the movement. "Libertarians also get votes of people who just would not bother voting if they didn't have another choice."

There is disagreement over which of the two main parties takes a bigger hit when a Libertarian is in the race. Boaz pointed to a 2016 CBS exit poll that showed that 25% of Libertarians who voted that year would have supported Democrat Hillary Clinton if there had been no Libertarian candidate. For Trump that figure was 15%, while 55% said they would have not voted.

Kenneth Mayer, a professor of American politics at the University of Wisconsin, said of Jorgenson: "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," he said.

Mayer said rarely in American politics had a third party candidate made any difference. A notable exception was Ralph Nader's winning over 97,000 votes in Florida in the 2000 presidential election, when George W. Bush won the state by just 537 votes. If a third party candidate's votes dwarf the election margins for the winner, then it matters, he said.

And that, Mayer and Boaz said, was definitely not the case this year.

'NEITHER REPRESENT ME'

John Vaught LaBeaume, a Libertarian political strategist who worked on the 2016 campaign of Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson, said most Libertarian voters simply would not vote for either a Democratic or Republican candidate.

Jorgensen, a psychology professor at Clemson University in Greenville, South Carolina, said her role was not to play spoiler, but to act as a wake-up call for the two major parties to do more to attract third-party voters.

Jorgensen told The Greenville News she would be happy if her campaign simply spurred "Republicans to start acting like Republicans and cutting the deficit" and "Democrats to go back to being the party of peace, bringing our troops home and giving the average individual their rights."

Her backers agree.

Morgan Thompson, a 39-year-old private detective in Waukesha, Wisconsin, said she eagerly voted for Jorgensen because of the "increased radicalization" of the two major parties.

If no Libertarian candidate had been on the Wisconsin ballot, Thompson said she would have submitted a blank ballot.