



Why I am voting for Gary Johnson

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August 16, 2016

With the two major parties fielding candidates only slightly less unpopular than the biblical plagues, could this be the year of the libertarian?

Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, who heads the Libertarian Party ticket for the second time, received just below 1 percent of the popular vote in 2012. Right now, polls show him at 8-10 percent. If he reaches the 15 percent threshold, he would have to be included in the presidential debates — which, if nothing else, would bring in more viewers who do not relish the idea of spending an evening with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on their TV screens.

On Nov. 8, I plan to vote for Johnson, whose running mate is former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld — barring a highly improbable situation in which it looks like Trump might win my home state of New Jersey and extra votes for Clinton may make a difference.

“Don’t vote for Johnson — that’s just throwing your vote away,” a friend told me recently.

But I think that, especially if Trump looks headed for a certain trouncing, a vote for Johnson-Weld may actually do more good than an extra vote for Clinton in a solidly blue state.

For one thing, more votes for a third-party candidate sends a message that people are fed up with the two-party establishment. This year, the reasons to be dissatisfied are more glaring than ever.

Some people say they are voting for Trump because a Trump victory would shake up the political system. That’s taking it a bit too far — like burning down the house to get rid of a bug infestation. On the other hand, a massive (by Libertarian Party standards) vote for Johnson-Weld would be a wake-up call to Republicans and Democrats.

The Libertarian ticket is also a good vehicle for a protest vote because the party reflects — if in somewhat extreme form — the political outlook of a growing number of Americans, particularly young people.

As Cato Institute executive vice president David Boaz pointed out in February, the Gallup Poll’s annual governance survey found libertarianism on the rise. (Disclosure: I am an unpaid research fellow with Cato.) Gallup measures political beliefs by asking whether the government should do

more to solve our country's problems or is already "trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses," and whether the government should promote traditional values or not favor any set of values. Those who pick the second option on both questions are classified as libertarians. In late 2015, libertarians accounted for a record 27 percent of Gallup respondents. Remarkably, they outnumbered conservatives (26 percent), liberals (23 percent), and populists (15 percent).

Another survey three years ago, by the Public Religion Research Institute, found that 7 percent of Americans are fairly strong libertarians who consistently prioritize individual rights, while another 15 percent are "libertarian leaners."

Most of the people counted as libertarian in these polls would likely disagree with the Libertarian Party's hard-core minimal-government agenda: The party's platform calls, for instance, for legalizing all drugs and ending "all federal programs and services not required under the U.S. Constitution." But this year's Libertarian Party candidates, both moderate Republicans in the past, are not hard-core libertarians themselves; instead, they champion a pragmatic path to less government and more protections for individual rights. They can appeal both to people concerned with lower taxes and less burdensome regulations and to people concerned with police brutality.

There is no realistic scenario in which Johnson wins the election. But if he outperformed Trump in several states, that would be a victory to cherish.