



## How the Libertarian Party (maybe) helped shift the presidential race

The Libertarian Party presidential nominee got fewer votes than in 2016. Here's how those votes helped change the election anyway.

Nov 13, 2020

Jane Coaston

Just before the election, I argued that third parties were **unlikely to play a major role** this year. The deck was seemingly stacked against them — an unpopular incumbent president and expected high turnout would make it harder for them to be competitive and garner votes from Americans displeased with both major parties.

It turns out that I was half-right, and half-wrong.

It's true that third-party votes declined from 2016 to 2020, as voters who may have voted for a third-party candidate in 2016 decided to vote for either Joe Biden or Donald Trump.

But it turned out that in a race that hinged on relatively small margins between Biden and Trump, one third-party candidate — Libertarian Party nominee Jo Jorgensen — may have helped turn the tide toward Biden in several states. She didn't generate massive numbers, but she didn't have to. Her votes were close enough to the margin to suggest that some voters who may have leaned toward Trump (or perhaps simply not voted for President at all) voted for her.

Many libertarians think that this bodes well for the future. As Libertarian Party national chair Joe Bishop-Henchman told me, "America didn't want Trump anymore but didn't want Biden's policies."

### How the Libertarian Party won — sort of

**More people voted for Joe Biden** than for any presidential candidate in American history. This gain happened not simply by generating votes from Democrats (or moderate or former Republicans), but from independents and the **estimated 5 million voters** who favored a third-party candidate in 2016.

Though votes are still being tabulated, so far, the **number of third-party votes has dropped precipitously from 2016 to 2020**, from more than 5 percent to perhaps less than 2 percent. Many of those third-party voters ultimately voted for Joe Biden: **as Reason Magazine's Matt Welch explained**, while Trump's voting percentage in states like Michigan and Arizona

mirrored his 2016 performance, votes that went to third-party candidates like Libertarian Party nominee Gary Johnson in 2016 appear to have gone to Biden instead.

To be clear, we don't know if 2016 voters and 2020 voters are the same people — third-party voters in 2016 may have stayed home in 2020, meaning that Joe Biden received a critical number of votes from first-time voters.

**But in Wisconsin**, where the gap between Biden and Trump stands currently at 20,557 votes, Jorgensen received 38,393 votes. And in Arizona, where the gap between Biden and Trump is an even tighter 12,813 votes, Jorgensen received 50,636 votes — nearly four times the margin between Biden and Trump.

Both of those states, which Trump won in 2016, went to Biden in 2020.

This is an almost exact reversal of what happened in 2016, when third-party candidates like Green Party nominee Jill Stein and then-Libertarian Party nominee Johnson received thousands more votes than the ultimate margin between Trump and then-Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton. As NBC News **reported the day after the 2016 election**:

In Michigan — which was a must-win for Clinton, but was still too close to call as of Wednesday morning, according to NBC News projections — Johnson and Stein had collectively taken a little more than 222,400 votes, or about 5 percent of the vote there. Trump, in contrast, held just over a 15,600-vote lead over Clinton.

In Florida, which was crucial to Trump's victory, Johnson, Stein and two other third-party candidates on the ballot collectively drew over 293,000 votes — more than twice the 128,000-plus votes that Trump led with as of early Wednesday morning.

### **“Libertarians are here to stay”**

Several prominent Republicans, like former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, expressed irritation at the success of the Libertarian Party (and **arguably, libertarianism** itself) this election cycle.

And the founder of Libertarians for Trump, Loyola University economist and anarcho-capitalist Walter E. Block, **wrote in the Wall Street Journal** on November 8 that libertarians had “spoiled” the election, arguing that “on the Libertarian-O-Meter, Mr. Trump scores much higher than Mr. Biden” because of his judicial nominations and deregulatory policies. He concluded, “Pardon me while I beat my head against the wall. How could libertarians in purple states be so stupid?”

But libertarianism is not synonymous with Trumpism (or conservatism, for that matter), and **Jorgensen's campaign** aimed to separate herself from both the Democratic and Republican party nominees, arguing for the federal decriminalization of all drugs and the defunding of the Drug Enforcement Administration, for instance, and **saying** that the United States should pull out of NATO and the United Nations and become “one giant Switzerland.”

So while some votes for Jorgensen may have come from conservatives, it's also possible that Libertarian Party voters are just that: libertarians, a voting cohort that may not have voted for Trump (or even voted at all) had there been no libertarians on the ballot.

As David Boaz **argued** at the Cato Institute, “In the end, if you ask whether Jo Jorgensen’s 1.8 million or so votes, or more specifically her votes in states decided by narrow margins, swung the election, the answer is no: had there been no Libertarian on the ballot, those voters would have been split among Biden, Trump, and not voting, with a tilt toward Biden (or maybe “against Trump”).”

Joe Bishop-Henchman told me that Jorgensen’s campaign was aimed at “protecting freedom,” adding, “She suggested maybe we should pay more attention to what power we’ve given up, rather than just who we choose to wield it.” And as to the **increasingly fractured relationship between libertarianism and mainline conservatism**, he said, “A decade ago there were still a lot of people who had dreams that the Republican Party would champion smaller government and more liberty, and the Tea Party wave used a lot of that rhetoric. Those dreams are dead now, for to be Republican now is to be pro-Trump, anti-free trade, and anti-immigrant.”

And he’s optimistic about the future of the libertarian movement, particularly as the country likely faces a divided government moving forward. “Polling shows most Americans are with Libertarians on free trade, open immigration, criminal justice reform, fiscal responsibility, ending the drug war, and bringing the troops home,” he told me. “If a Democratic president and Republican Senate can come together on those things, great! If they don’t and end up in gridlock, we’ll be ready in 2022 and 2024.”