



Meet Gary Johnson's Koch-Network Money Men

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Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party presidential candidate, is currently having a moment with younger voters. Presumably this is because he has emphasized his pro-marijuana stance and stayed away from touting his views on nearly everything else, which, as [AlterNet has reported](#), are very right-wing. Yet look behind the curtain, and you'll find that Johnson's candidacy is fueled by money provided by funders who are driving forces behind things most young voters abhor, like the privatization of public education and the "right" to pollute the environment.

A combination of engaging social media launched by pro-Johnson PACs and the candidate's goofy, likable personality add up to 29 percent of voters between the ages of 18-34 telling pollsters for NBC News that they plan to vote for the third-party candidate. (His "What is Aleppo?" gaffe seems not to have made a dent in his numbers.) Several [respected pollsters](#) and [political scientists](#) have deduced that Johnson's totals cut further into votes that would normally accrue to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton than to Republican nominee Donald Trump. Young voters comprise a critical constituency in the Democratic coalition, and Clinton has struggled to engage them, even gaining the endorsement of Bernie Sanders, the primary challenger who garnered great enthusiasm among young Democrats.

Johnson's plan, as [reported by Politico's Ben Birnbaum](#), is to siphon enough votes from both major-party candidates to deprive each of the 270-electoral vote majority a candidate needs in order to win the White House. Then the race gets thrown into the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, where the third-party candidate quixotically expects to win. But even if this long-shot scheme had a chance, it's hard to imagine members of the Republican majority in Congress voting to hand the White House to someone other than their party's nominee. That all raises the question, what is Johnson really up to, and whose interests does he represent?

Birnbaum reports that the Johnson campaign has "recently reshuffled its map," focusing on states "with large numbers of disgruntled Sanders voters," which he identifies as Iowa, Wisconsin, Oregon and Washington. In addition, the Johnson forces are also making television and radio ad buys, according to [Advertising Age](#), in Nevada, Colorado, New Hampshire and Maine—all states [identified by FiveThirtyEight's Harry Enten](#) as more-or-less "must-win" states for Clinton (meaning her chances of winning the general election drop precipitously if she loses any one of them)

While the Johnson airtime buys are tiny compared with Clinton's, they amount to gauntlets thrown, especially when you factor in the Johnson forces' clever online strategy. If your target is young voters, television buys probably aren't a great use of your resources. But creating viral videos probably is, and the pro-Johnson AlternativePAC is doing just [that](#).

Despite the fact that Johnson's poll numbers—he's at 8 percent in the Real Clear Politics average—are higher than any previous modern-era third-party candidate at this point in the election cycle, he still has a long climb to make the 15 percent threshold required for inclusion in the presidential debates. So, the campaign's present focus is on elevating his profile so his poll numbers go up, with the hope of making it onto the debate stage October 9. (On Friday, he stuck out his tongue for the television cameras as a way of demonstrating what he might do if he makes it.)

A Run at Clinton Voters?

According to independent journalist Mark Ames, in Johnson's 2012 presidential bid, the candidate enjoyed the wisdom of his notorious adviser, Roger Stone, the dirty trickster who is now advising the Trump campaign. Stone is the guy who brought conspiracy theorist Alex Jones into the Trump camp (and convinced Trump to make a December appearance on Jones' InfoWars radio program), and has formulated and advanced much of Trump's anti-Clinton rhetoric.

Ames dug up a 2007 interview Stone gave to the *Weekly Standard* in which he shared his formula for winning an election for a less-than-popular major-party candidate: Get a credible third-party candidate to split the opponent's vote. Stone claims to have been in on just such an operation in 1980 on behalf of third-party candidate John Anderson, whose candidacy help deliver New York State for Ronald Reagan by skimming votes that would have likely otherwise gone to incumbent president Jimmy Carter.

One indication of whose interests Johnson represents is his source of funding. It's likely we'll never know the sources of all the money flowing to pro-Johnson efforts (or those of other candidates, for that matter), since the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* allows all manner of non-profit groups to run ads and canvass for political candidates without revealing the names of their donors.

But we do know enough to look at who's behind a couple of pro-Johnson political action committees, and the corporate entities whose employees donate the most money directly to the campaign: Jeffrey Yass of Susquehanna Group International, a financial options-trading firm, and Chris Rufer, president and founder of the Morning Star Packing Company, an agribusiness tomato-grower and processor of tomato products. And Johnson's past association with Koch Industries, which benefited from a multimillion-dollar no-bid contract for a New Mexico highway given one of its subsidiaries during Johnson's tenure as governor of that state, has led to speculation he will receive support from political groups in the Koch network.

Major Donor Funds Attacks on Public Education

Booking ads for Johnson is Purple PAC, where Yass is so far the largest donor, at \$1 million, which was reportedly used for an August Purple PAC buy for ad time on CNN and Fox. Since September 8, Purple PAC has purchased airtime on Johnson's behalf to the tune of \$800,000, according to Federal Election Commission reports available via OpenSecrets.com. Purple PAC was founded by Ed Crane, former president of the Cato Institute. Both Yass and Crane sit on Cato's board of directors, as does David Koch.

The ad Purple PAC is placing on Johnson's behalf paints Clinton and Trump as equally undesirable, and champions Johnson as a saner alternative, one who is "socially tolerant," but champions "free enterprise" and low taxes.

But it's the privatization of public education that appears to be the cause closest to Yass' heart. Last year, Paul Blumenthal, the Huffington Post's money-in-politics reporter, undertook an exhaustive review of spending by two non-profit groups funded by Yass and his partners at Susquehanna, tracing donations from the groups Rosebush Corp. and Green Orchard Inc., to various groups and PACs that either support the diversion of tax dollars to privately run charter schools, or the voucherization of public-school funds to be applied to tuition at private and parochial schools. Last year, Yass and his partners at the Susquehanna Group International bankrolled Philadelphia mayoral candidate Anthony Williams, a proponent of voucherizing public education.

"In 2011," writes Blumenthal, "Rosebush Corp. contributed \$100,000 to the American Federation for Children, an education reform group that billionaire Republican donor Betsy DeVos founded in 2010."

Betsy DeVos is a member of the super-rich family that founded Amway, a family that is also active in funding the network of political organizations and entities built by Charles and David Koch, the billionaire principals of Koch Industries. Known for her opposition to sex education in schools in favor of teaching abstinence, DeVos is also a force behind the pro-privatization organization, Students First, that is fronted by Michelle Rhee, the controversial former chancellor of Washington, D.C.'s public school system. According to Blumenthal, the American Federation for Children gave \$700,000 to Students First in 2011.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. According to Blumenthal's report, the two non-profits linked to Yass and his partners have dispensed millions to groups lobbying for the privatization of public education.

Yass is also a major donor to the Club for Growth Action, a super PAC known for supporting primary challenges to Republican candidates who don't adhere to the sort of small-government, anti-regulatory ideology sold by the Koch brothers. In the current election cycle, Club for Growth Action has spent more than \$14 million. Yass' Susquehanna International Group has already given the super PAC \$500,000 so far in the 2016 election cycle.

The Pollution-Happy Agribusiness Donor

Chris Rufer, the founder and president of Morning Star Packing Company, likes a good fight. He's fought with the FEC over legal limits on independent expenditures by political parties (he and his co-plaintiffs lost), and now he's fighting California's Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board over a \$1.5 million fine imposed upon his company for enlarging wastewater ponds beyond the limits stated on his permits, according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*. The water board charges Morning Star with polluting groundwater with excess salts, nitrates and organic waste.

"We don't see that magnitude of problems very often," Wendy Wyels, environmental program manager of the control board, told Geoffrey Mohan of the *Los Angeles Times*. Rufer has vowed to fight the fine in court. It's not the first time he's been cited by the water board: In 1995 it cited

the libertarian entrepreneur “for dumping too many pollutants into surface and ground water,” according to the *Times*.

Rufer has donated both directly to the Johnson campaign, and given \$500,000 to AlternativePAC, a pro-Johnson group that is promoting, through a viral video, a matching service for Johnson supporters that the PAC wordsmiths call Balanced Rebellion. The idea is that a traditionally Democratic voter can, via the Balanced Revolution website, match his or her pledge to vote for Johnson with that of a traditionally Republican voter, ostensibly ensuring their votes do not draw exclusively from one or the other of the major-party candidates. “Like Tinder, but not gross,” the promotional video promises.

The video, produced by the ad agency that brought you clever internet spots for Squatty Potty and Poo-Pourri, features “dead Abe Lincoln” explaining what he sees as horrible about both Trump and Clinton, and promoting the Balanced Rebellion idea. “Dead Abe Lincoln” even makes assassination jokes about himself and claims to have been a third-party candidate. It’s so weird it’s hard to look away, ensuring the viewer stays tuned for the full five minutes.

AlternativePAC is run by Matt Kibbe, the former chief executive officer of FreedomWorks, a Washington, D.C., astroturf group that helped organize raucous townhall meetings in congressional districts across the country in opposition to the Affordable Care Act. FreedomWorks is credited with having helped found the Tea Party movement.

Despite the modest investments made so far in the Johnson campaign by wealthy right-wingers, the impacts could be significant. If Johnson is able to tip a couple of Clinton’s must-win states, he could throw the presidential race into disarray. And chaos, as we’ve seen, tends to favor Donald Trump.