



The Libertarian Moment That Never Comes

Every four years, the party mounts a hopeless bid for president. But this year, with nominee Jo Jorgensen, there's even less hope than usual

Kevin Mahnken

November 2, 2020

Nearly four years removed from its best electoral performance in history, libertarianism finds itself on familiar terrain: tantalizingly close to a breakout moment that remains forever out of reach. Bereft of serious candidates or political capital, it is a philosophy with many potential adherents and yet no national standard-bearers; a movement teeming with ideas that have all been carted off by, or dissolved within, rival factions.

While there are a few explanations for these paradoxes, the proximate cause is brand awareness. According to a [2014 survey](#) from the Pew Research Center, 11 percent of respondents self-identified as libertarians. But just 57 percent accurately associated the term with small government and personal freedom, and there is [reason to think](#) that a sizable chunk of the electorate is already favorably disposed toward the blend of social permissiveness and laissez-faire economics that the Libertarian Party champions.

Historically, though, that unwieldy group has found political homes in one of the nation's two major parties. This year, secular-trending suburbanites and college-educated whites—who are, [at least in theory](#), demographically well suited to libertarian positions—look to be moving toward the Democrats after favoring Donald Trump four years ago. The presidential candidacy of Jo Jorgensen, this year's sacrificial offering to the Libertarian Party ballot line, is unlikely to disrupt that migration.

There are a few ways of looking at Jorgensen, a little-known psychologist and the party's first female nominee. She has [grabbed as much as 4 percent](#) in a national poll and approaches that number in [surveys of some swing states](#). If that doesn't sound like much, consider that former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson's 3.3 percent finish in 2016 was, by far, the Libertarians' high-water mark in any presidential race. To come close to replicating that performance, [in spite of voters' post-Trump fears](#) of supporting a third-party spoiler, would be an achievement in its own right.

But there's no such thing as a moral victory in politics. For parties to win credibility and influence policy, they have to do more than vault over a two-foot bar. Over the last five years, the two-party establishment has been effectively challenged by the insurgent movements of democratic socialism and right-wing nationalism, represented by dynamic personalities like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Donald Trump. Who, exactly, will spearhead the libertarian revolution? Not Jorgensen, it seems. Over at *Reason*, that most stalwart of libertarian publications, she has failed to win the unanimous [support of the staff](#). Many on staff plan simply to sit this election out; a few shall vote for Joe Biden between gritted teeth. That leaves [viral sweater-wearer Ken Bone](#) as Jorgensen's best-known supporter.

It's worth remembering that the party's ambitions haven't always been a laughingstock. Perpetually hungry for a new election angle, political reporters began musing about the arrival of a "libertarian moment" late in the Obama era. And it's fair to say that there was evidence during those years of a public turn toward individual liberty and away from government intrusion: increased acceptance of drug use and gay rights, a post-Iraq despair of foreign entanglements, and the growing revulsion with mass incarceration and militarized policing.

What few realized was that the pundits were reading vapor trails, not tea leaves.

What few realized was that the pundits were reading vapor trails, not tea leaves. The energy and political conditions that might have powered a nonmarginal Libertarian Party to serious wins were instead absorbed by the successive presidential runs of Ron Paul, himself a Libertarian presidential nominee in 1988. The Paul campaigns of 2008 and 2012 were a kind of joyous carnival uniting wet-behind-the-ears college kids and weirdo goldbugs. But they culminated in a few top-three finishes in Republican primaries, not a national Libertarian groundswell.

Paul's son and successor, Rand, tried his luck in 2016 but never caught fire. In hindsight, the strategy of plotting a more libertarian course within the GOP—and with the exception of a few selective critiques of drone strikes, Rand ran on a mostly orthodox conservative platform—was doomed from the start, because the party isn't primarily composed of anti-militarists or pot enthusiasts. In Donald Trump, in fact, its rank and file found a hero mostly divorced from any impulse toward smaller government.

One lasting mystery of the last half-decade is why the "libertarian moment," which failed to manifest prior to Trump's arrival, was not a tardy product of his administration. Here is a man who built an entire presidency around attacking immigration and free trade, who has escalated conflicts in the Middle East, and who has threatened religious minorities and members of the press; he is, in many ways, as anti-libertarian as they come. Yet the political faction most hostile to government overreach in both private and economic life has not been able to take advantage.

Johnson's relatively strong showing in 2016 bespoke significant right-leaning dissatisfaction with Trump. The defeated ranks of the Never Trump crowd might easily have defected to the Libertarian Party in 2017, carrying a significant portfolio of media and donor assets out of the Republican tent along with them. Indeed, most of that cohort fit a socially liberal, fiscally conservative profile that would have required little ideological accommodation on either side. Instead, this faction gravitated toward novel enterprises like the Lincoln Project and formed a de facto armistice with Democrats in an effort to deny Trump reelection.

Rather than consolidating a newly aggrieved legion of supporters, movement libertarianism has spent the last few years in a state of reflective evolution. Prominent commentators like economist Tyler Cowen have observed the birth of a "state capacity libertarianism," embodied in new groups like the Niskanen Center, that is more agnostic about the scope of government than traditional organizations like the Cato Institute. Meanwhile, activists and commentators have cast about for new identifying labels, some discarding "libertarian" for the more nebulous concept of "classical liberalism."

Above all else, the chief obstacle to a growing Libertarian Party—one that actually wins office from time to time, or at least regularly claims a vote share in the high single digits—is simply the architecture of the American electoral system, which tends to sideline minor parties. Independent

and third-party bids have, at times, broken through, as with Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, George Wallace in 1968, and Ross Perot in 1992. But those men were nationally known figures, each offering a true ideological alternative to what the Democrats and Republicans were serving up.

There might have been such a man for the moment this year: Justin Amash.

There might have been such a man for the moment this year: Justin Amash. The Michigan Republican, who won national headlines for breaking with his party and voting to impeach Donald Trump, explored the possibility of running for the Libertarian Party nomination about six weeks into the coronavirus lockdown, a notion that seemed to cause much more anxiety among establishment Democrats than the Trump camp. Amash, however, withdrew his short-lived campaign for the Libertarian Party nomination later in the spring. It seems quite likely in retrospect that he might have been blazing a brighter electoral path than Jorgensen is at the moment, but we'll never know. It's difficult, and perhaps impossible, to bring capable, ambitious leaders to moribund parties.

Somewhat famously, the Libertarian Party is home to a great number of eccentric cranks who do not represent the full breadth and influence of its backers. But neither are the Democrats or the Republicans the ideal organizational vessels for social democracy or free-market fusionism, respectively. Parties don't need to be flawless repositories for the ideas that underlie them. They need solid candidates, ample resources, and ideas that resonate with the public.

While Jorgensen is all but certain to claim little better than also-ran status on Tuesday night, her end of the political spectrum shouldn't be dismissed as a fringe orthodoxy. Whatever its lowly political status, libertarianism can claim durable toeholds in technology, business, and law and farsighted backers like Peter Thiel and the Koch family. And even if Biden will receive the votes of a few *Reason* staffers on Tuesday, it's hard to imagine their affection extending much beyond Inauguration Day if he ousts Trump. So you'd be wise to respect libertarians as a movement. Respecting them as a party will have to wait.