

VANITY FAIR

Is Justin Amash Running for President?

The Michigan congressman turned on Trump, renounced the GOP, and is flirting with full-blown libertarianism. Could a quixotic presidential run be far behind?

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Over the past two years, Justin Amash’s fans in the libertarian movement—that strange genus of political animal obsessed with individual liberty, free markets, and Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek—couldn’t help but observe that the distinguished congressman from Michigan was getting noticeably *jacked*.

He wasn’t posing with dumbbells like Paul Ryan or bragging about his CrossFit routine like Donald Trump Jr. But libertarians pay attention to things like improved muscle mass—a manifestation, perhaps, of their relentless pursuit of self-reliance and self-improvement—and so inevitably Amash was asked about his routine. He’d started working out and improving his diet, he told people, and he’d become sort of addicted. By the time he held his infamous town hall in late May—the one in which he laid out his case for impeaching Donald Trump—his biceps had started bulging out of his shirtsleeves. *Something* was up, it seemed, and it didn’t take an Ayn Rand scholar to wonder whether Amash, now a muscle-bound gym rat, was working through some kind of breakup.

As it happens, around the time he started hitting the gym, Amash had begun agonizing over his relationship with the GOP. He was still a conservative, but the Republican Party had changed. In private, two people told me, he began floating the idea—quasi-seriously—about joining the Libertarian Party, and in public, he was barraged with questions about becoming their candidate (largely during interviews with the libertarian press). If ever his feelings were in doubt, they became even more clear after the Mueller report, when, on May 18, he became the only Republican to say Trump had committed impeachable offenses.

Amash’s first breakup was with the Freedom Caucus, the small but ferocious group of Tea Party congressmen who revived the practice of shutting down the government over budget fights, which he left on June 11. This was unsurprising to many, given Amash’s recent spate of media appearances criticizing the president. Fewer still were surprised when Amash engaged in a Twitter spat with the president’s son Don Jr. (“I hear Michigan is beautiful during primary season,” Trump Jr. wrote. Amash shot back: “If it’s what you say I love it especially later in the summer.”) Still, Amash’s next move came as something of a shock. In an op-ed in

the *Washington Post* (on Independence Day, no less), Amash announced he was leaving the Republican Party altogether to become an independent.

Libertarians pride themselves on being guided by principle, not practicalities. Still, in political terms, Justin Amash had run off a cliff. So the question was where he planned to land. Those I spoke to agreed that the 39-year-old wasn't ready to retire from the political arena, sinking into a tenured chair at the Cato Institute or taking a job complaining about Trump on cable news, like some of his former Tea Party peers. Speculation abounded in the libertarian world—and among the remnants of the Tea Party that had resisted the movement's drift into Trumpism—that Amash might run for president, and maybe on their team. “He's a very, very competitive SOB,” said Matt Welch, editor at large at the libertarian-leaning *Reason* magazine, citing his frequent Twitter clashes with Don Jr. (and Amash's newly built revenge body).

For now, Amash is only running to keep his seat—but the election won't be until 2020, and he faces threats both from Republicans, who are preparing to primary him, and Democrats, who now see an opening to score a seat in Western Michigan. And he might be blazing another path. Next week, Amash is scheduled to make a high-profile appearance at Freedom Fest, where libertarian activists—and more importantly, high-dollar donors—will convene. (His speaker bio does little to quell the rumors: “Will he? Won't he?... One thing is for certain, we are looking for a presidential candidate that embrace principles of liberty to the MAX. Is Justin Amash the one?”)

Over the past several months, Amash has been courting the libertarian press as well. For all the media appearances he's made in mainstream outlets, he's done an equal amount with the smaller libertarian news programs and podcasts, whose audience are filled with the sort of die-hard Constitutionalists who could form the backbone of a nationwide grassroots network. It has been in these settings that Amash has teased what could be a next act. I was pointed to an interview Amash did back in January, at a small libertarian student convention in Washington, D.C., in which the topic turned to whether voters in the presidential election were willing to think outside the Democrat–Republican nexus. “Describe, if you would, an ideal third-party candidate,” *Reason* magazine's editor in chief, Katherine Mangu-Ward, asked at one point—“someone who might actually make some headway in the current electoral climate.”

“Well, he wears Air Jordans,” Amash quipped, and the audience laughed as they noticed his shoes. But as he went on to describe the ideal presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party—someone who wasn't a “squishy Republican,” someone who hewed closely to the party's ideals and was strongly aligned with the base, and someone who could nevertheless go mainstream and reach a wider audience beyond the die-hard movement activists—a few spectators wondered whether Amash's white Jordan 5s were more than just a punch line.

Kentucky congressman Thomas Massie, one of Amash's allies in Congress and a self-described libertarian, has cited a personal theory about the rise and fall of the Tea Party movement, which seemed briefly to offer libertarians a real home in the Republican Party. “I'm thinking, Wow, these libertarian ideas are really catching on within the Republican Party,” he observed at a *Reason* event in 2018, reflecting somewhat self-deprecatingly on his election in 2012, as well as the political success of Senator Rand Paul, another libertarian-minded Republican who had built a sizable following. But when he traveled to support Paul's 2016 presidential campaign, Massie had an unpleasant revelation. “My voters in Kentucky, the ones that elected me, were voting for Donald Trump,” he said. “So what I realize is, they're not voting for the libertarian-

leaning Republican ideology. They're voting for the craziest son of a bitch in the race." Trump "just took it to a whole new level and dropped the ideology."

After the election, the rest of the Republican Party abandoned its principles too. Mark Meadows and Jim Jordan, both leaders of the Freedom Caucus, went full MAGA. The party stopped talking about deficits, allowing the national debt to balloon. Libertarian-leaning allies including Mark Sanford and Jeff Flake were defeated or resigned, handing the reins to more pro-Trump replacements. Rand Paul, who used to be a thorn in Trump's side, is now one of his favorite golfing buddies. Even Massie, beloved among constitutional conservatives, may soon face multiple primary challengers.

Amash himself never had a strong relationship with the GOP in the first place—an iciness that began long before Trump. Over the years, as Amash and the rest of the Freedom Caucus frequently opposed former House Speakers John Boehner and Paul Ryan, the establishment, both in Michigan and Congress, slowly pushed back, kicking him off virtually every committee save for the Oversight Committee (which he recently resigned from) and mounting an unsuccessful primary challenge in 2014. After Amash and the rest of the Freedom Caucus pushed Boehner out of the speakership in 2015, things didn't improve.

Critics might counter that by bailing on the GOP before his next primary, Amash merely avoids what was shaping up to be a bloodbath. Already, there are at least four other candidates with likely GOP support vying for Amash's seat. (The latest entrant into the race, Peter Meijer, is the 31-year-old scion of the Meijer Grocery regional empire, as well as a veteran of the Iraq War.) There may be no point in fighting for the seat anyway, considering that it may be redistricted in 2022. And there are other practical considerations: While Amash defeated his last primary challenger, Brian Ellis, by a 15-point margin, he did so with the backing of powerful groups the Club for Growth, which recently criticized him, and the billionaire DeVos family, which has now severed its financial support. Michigan GOP consultant John Sellek, who is not working for any of the candidates in this cycle, added that Amash's reputation in his home district may have soured too. "It's always been a conservative area and it's been an area where folks just kind of keep their head down and get their job done, and don't draw a lot of attention to themselves," he told me, citing the actions of the district's most famous congressman, Gerald Ford, who later pardoned Richard Nixon so America could move past Watergate. "It's not a place for showboats."

For a time, said Sellek, Amash fit that desire for a congressman who got stuff done—he was quite good at spending time in his district and meeting with his constituents—but as he began growing vocally anti-Trump, "that kind of unique principled stance of voting no on nearly everything has worn thin with voters over there. He was already facing growing opposition from inside just the community of Republicans and business in West Michigan who were looking for a representative in Congress that was trying to get end results that benefited the community, instead of using their representation purely as a philosophical standing point." Even if the district contains anti-Trump voters, he suggested, they might be more inclined to vote for the Democrat.

Supporters suggest Amash is the rare politician who might survive outside the rigidly defined borders of the current two-party system—and might even change the conversation. "He really does come across as someone who can speak the libertarian language to people who are non-libertarians," said Brian Nichols, the host of *The Brian Nichols Podcast*, where Amash gave his first interview after leaving the Freedom Caucus. "He's able to speak to people from a civil

rights perspective that would appeal more to the left and give that libertarian message. And then conversely, he can speak about economic issues from a libertarian perspective to those in the right and really relate to them. And I think that is something that we so desperately need.”

At the same time, it’s not clear whether Amash has the votes or the resources to persist in Trump’s Washington. Could a kamikaze presidential run be an exit strategy? Pete Mackin, a Libertarian Party organizer in Michigan who made his first bid for state representative at the same time as Amash, told me that back in May, he’d spoken to Amash’s office administrator about the familiar agonies of the post–Tea Party libertarian movement, the week before Amash began tweeting about impeachment. As they kvetched about their dwindling purchase in the Republican Party, Mackin recalled, she said that she only wanted to help him keep his seat: “I could run a congressional campaign. I can’t really run a presidential one.”

Modern libertarians have been a fixture of American politics for decades, but, with a few exceptions, have never played a starring role. Part of the problem has stemmed from fundamental disagreements over the utility of partnering with the GOP to deregulate government and cut spending. The other part, Nichols noted, is that libertarians, by principle, are just not well-suited to working in large collectives. “It’s mostly entirely focused on property rights and nonaggression, but also at the ideas of, you know, personal responsibility—avoiding the ideas of the collective—and with that, and you have [very] individualistic people within the movement who they don’t like being told what to do,” he said. “I mean, the libertarian mascot is the porcupine. ‘Leave me alone. I won’t hurt you. Don’t bother me.’”

Nicholas Sarwark, the chairman of the Libertarian Party, told me that Amash would have better luck running on the Libertarian ticket than as an independent. For one, he said, the L.P. has ballot access in all 50 states, something that even billionaires running as independents struggle to achieve. For another, there’s still money floating around the libertarian donor world (primarily the Koch network, which recently announced that it was open to supporting Democratic candidates, a stunning reversal for the formerly loathed right-wing Kochtopus.) “When you have a strong presidential ticket, a lot of that money comes off the bench,” Sarwark said—especially if the Democrats nominate someone that libertarians can’t get behind. “There are definitely scenarios where across a lot of strong libertarian positions, you may end up with a Republican and a Democratic nominee, [who] are both opposed to the libertarian position and then the libertarian candidate who’s for it.”

But though their door might be open, the Libertarian Party isn’t interested in serving as a crash landing pad for Amash. Like any other political party, the path to the nomination requires a grueling campaign, wherein Amash would have to win over the majority of a thousand-plus delegates from across the country, culminating in a convention next May. And due to his status as a former Republican, Amash would still rouse suspicion among a significant portion of die-hard delegates who prefer a purist over another former Republican like Gary Johnson, who won the party’s nominating contest in 2012 and 2016. (Ron Nielson, Gary Johnson’s former campaign manager, told me that Johnson had done a cannonball run for five months to build up a winning coalition, but it was highly unlikely that the party would let him run again.)

Sarwark, ever the noninterventionist, told me that while he would be intrigued by an Amash run, only the market could decide his fate. “For purposes of the nomination, Justin Amash and Vermin Supreme”—a performance artist whose political platform supports time travel—“are essentially egalitarian until the nomination is given by the delegates.”

For now, Amash's future depends on whether there are enough true believers to keep his seat—or to fuel a run for a higher office. The libertarian-leaning Cato Institute estimates that anywhere between 7 and 22% of Americans identify as libertarian—a range that's wide enough to account for infinite possibilities. If Amash can establish his principles and reach outside the small libertarian community, his fans believe, he could be a seminal figure. “I guess I look at Justin versus Trump as an Andrew Jackson versus John Quincy Adams,” Mackin said. Trump, of course, is a well-known admirer of the anti-establishmentarian Jackson, a raging populist fond of forcibly expelling Native Americans from American soil. As Mackin sees it, Amash is very much like the sixth president, who warned Americans of the necessity of *obsta principiis*—the idea that the expansion of big government must be stopped before growing out of control. But Mackin left out the part where John Quincy Adams lost.