

THE DENVER POST

The Libertarian Party, born in Colorado 50 years ago, still seeks elusive mainstream acceptance

Jon Murray

June 20, 2021

The United States' third-largest political party — what its main founder considered “the last, best hope for freedom in America” — took root a half-century ago in a living room in Westminster.

The TV flickered on, David Nolan would later recall, as the then-28-year-old advertising executive and his wife gathered in their duplex with three friends in August 1971. They listened, aghast, as Republican President Richard Nixon announced plans to intervene in the economy in once-unthinkable ways to deal with inflation and high unemployment.

In that moment, the five who were among a growing movement of people skeptical of government interference in personal and economic lives decided they needed a new political home. Within months, the Libertarian Party was born. And in August, the national party will gather in Colorado to commemorate the state's lesser-known role in its formation — and its present.

Now based in Alexandria, Virginia, it's the most successful minor party in the modern era, with nearly 700,000 registered voters in the 30 or so states and the District of Columbia that allow Libertarian as an option. The party made the ballot in all 50 states in several presidential cycles, including the last two, and it runs more candidates at all levels than any other minor party.

But the Libertarians haven't yet accomplished the founders' ultimate goal: to become enough of a force in American politics that Democrats and Republicans would be compelled to compete routinely against their ideas on the national stage. It wouldn't necessarily mean winning the presidency or even many races — just enough votes or seats to make them sweat.

Victory in a congressional race has proved elusive, as has getting above the low-single digits for the presidency. After early success in a handful of states, a Libertarian has won just one state legislative election in the last two decades — last fall in Wyoming. The vast majority of the party's victories have been at the local government level, with more than 200 current officeholders.

How to win more often is an ever-present debate within the party, between those eager to scale up and a vocal contingent unwilling to compromise on the party's iron-clad principles for mass appeal. All are aware that minor parties face challenges to breaking through, from tricky ballot-access laws in some states to the structure of American elections.

“In 10 years, I’d like to see 10,000 elected Libertarians — I’d like to see Libertarians on every school board, on every city council, in every state legislature,” Libertarian National Committee Chair Joe Bishop-Henchman said in an interview conducted before he announced his intention to resign on Friday. “I’ve seen first-hand the difference when you have a Libertarian at the table. The questions that no one else would ask get asked. The corruption and the waste — I mean, it just doesn’t happen as easily.”

A political analyst who studies third parties said the intensifying polarization of recent years offers an opportunity for the Libertarians to appeal to disaffected Republicans who aren’t on board with where former President Donald Trump has taken the party. But the Libertarians’ uniquely ideological underpinnings make such a pivot difficult.

“They’ve been slowly gaining support and strength since they were founded. ... But they haven’t really broken through in the way that third parties used to a century or so ago,” said Bernard Tamas, an associate professor of political science at Valdosta State University in Georgia. He authored the 2018 book “The Demise and Rebirth of American Third Parties.”

“The political floor is shifting, but they’re not shifting with it,” Tamas said.

Steady appeal to voters who feel left out

If Libertarianism is a party stuck “in startup mode,” as Bishop-Henchman recently acknowledged, it maintains a steady appeal to a slice of voters who feel left out of the two-party system.

Sydni Sturdivant, 29, a self-described moderate, said she felt “politically homeless” for years. Her collection of views doesn’t fit easily among Democrats or Republicans: She fervently favors LGBTQ rights and gun rights, she supports calls for changes in policing approaches, she wants an end to the war on drugs and she wants lower levels of taxes and business regulation.

Sturdivant found her presidential candidate last November in Jo Jorgensen, the Libertarian nominee, and last month attended the Libertarian Party of Colorado’s state convention in Golden. She liked what she heard.

“I’m mostly Libertarian because I just want to be left alone,” said Sturdivant, an insurance underwriter who lives in Centennial. “I just want everyone to be able to live their life in private and not have the government on their back constantly.”

Today’s Libertarian Party attracts a colorful coalition of freedom-lovers and anti-government activists — including anarchists — with plenty of eccentric characters sprinkled in.

A 2016 analysis of several polls by the Cato Institute found self-identified libertarians — not just party voters — were more likely to be male than female by a factor of nearly two-to-one. White people were slightly overrepresented and Black people underrepresented, but among millennials, the racial disparities shrank.

Colorado’s state party convention was raucous, with an early fight over competing agendas for party business. The May 21-23 gathering also included the unseating of most state party officers over personality conflicts and questions of leadership. In other words, it was a typically spirited Libertarian gathering.

Those who lost their positions in the turnover included state chairwoman Victoria Reynolds. The day before, she proudly recounted the party's efforts to help organize protests against Gov. Jared Polis' executive orders and mandates during the pandemic, a posture few disagreed with.

"It was very sad to see people succumb to fear and government propaganda, and I watched tyranny prevail," Reynolds told dozens of delegates and attendees. "Notwithstanding all of this, the Libertarian Party of Colorado grew by thousands, and our chartered (local) affiliates went from five to 10."

Colorado voter registration data show the party's active voter base grew by nearly 5,000 from February 2020 through May, far outpacing the major parties' growth. The state ranks third among states with Libertarian registration — nearly 1.2% of voters, or 48,236. Nebraska is tops in the U.S., followed by Utah. The party's strongest numbers tend to be west of the Mississippi River.

But while the voter rolls grow, the national party is smaller than it was 20 years ago on two key metrics: the number of dues-paying members, who are the most active, and fundraising. The national party raised more than \$3 million a year in the 1999-2000 cycle, compared to about \$2 million a year now, Federal Election Commission records show, but adjusted for inflation, it's down more than half.

Favoring less intrusion — or no government

Libertarians have framed their beliefs as favoring minimal government intrusion on personal freedoms, which tend to echo Democratic positions on issues including abortion rights, immigration and, more recently, same-sex marriage. At the same time, they favor minimal intrusion on economic issues, which echoes Republicans' tax aversions and prizing of free-market principles.

"It means giving control of things back to the people — letting the people make their own decisions," said David Aitkin, 74, a longtime Colorado party member.

But they reject where the major parties get heavy-handed — financially supporting safety-net programs and regulating people's conduct. In short, as a Jefferson County Libertarian Party postcard put it: "We are keeping the Republicans out of your bedroom and the Democrats out of your wallet!"

Jorgensen believes such a formulation is quickly growing stale in today's politics.

"You can't say that anymore, because the left are against individual liberty now even more than the right — you have to be so careful what you say," she said in an interview. "On the right side, we've got Republicans who were spending, like, worse than the Democrats."

Even as Colorado has been mostly taken over by Democrats, it still is a place with a small-L libertarian streak in its political DNA. Its voters passed the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights in 1992, placing restrictions on taxation and spending that still have many fans, and then made Colorado one of the first states to legalize recreational marijuana in 2012.

It makes sense to Caryn Ann Harlos, the party's national secretary as well as its unofficial historian, that Colorado birthed the Libertarian Party, too.

“I do think it’s the western thing ... it’s like the frontier spirit. Rather than the Libertarian Party contributing to it, it is why the Libertarian Party formed here,” said Harlos, who lives in Castle Rock and wears a green Statue of Liberty crown at events, including the recent state convention.

“This should settle it for us”

The party’s founding was the culmination of a rising movement in U.S. political thought.

Nolan, who died in 2010, wrote in a Reason essay that he came up politically in the 1950s and 1960s, when many young conservatives were drawn to libertarian-minded themes in the novels of Ayn Rand, including “Atlas Shrugged” — still a common lodestar. He joined in political and intellectual circles that pushed back against mainstream Republican politics from a libertarian perspective, he wrote. There was a similar, but smaller libertarian movement on the left.

Nixon’s Aug. 15, 1971, televised address was the final straw. The president announced a plan for a 90-day national freeze on wages and prices as well as suspending the ability for foreign governments to exchange dollars for gold, part of the gold standard.

“If there was ever any doubt as to whether we need a party that stands for real limited government and individual freedom, then this should settle it for us,” Nolan recalled thinking in a retrospective interview in 2001 with Ari Armstrong, a Colorado political writer who was a Libertarian at the time.

After seeking support for the idea of a new party, including placing a small ad in Reason magazine, eight people voted officially to form the party on Dec. 11, 1971, at the home of Luke Zell in Colorado Springs.

There was skepticism then and now about the wisdom of forming a political party, though Jorgensen sees it as inevitable.

“The problems had gotten so bad that there had to be some escape valve. ... Maybe instead of getting founded in ’71, it could’ve gotten founded in ’81,” she said.

The first convention was held in June 1972 in a hotel in Denver’s Capitol Hill neighborhood. Nearly 90 delegates, mostly men, approved bylaws and a firm statement of principles. They nominated a libertarian philosophy professor, John Hospers, for president and broadcaster Tonie Nathan for vice president.

The ticket made the ballot only in Colorado and Washington and won a few thousand votes. But in the Electoral College, a Republican elector from Virginia cast his vote for the Libertarians as a protest — marking the first time a woman ever received an electoral vote.

Since then, the party has nominated lesser-known presidential candidates who were strong libertarians but had limited appeal. In other cycles, they selected better-known politicians who had won office as Republicans, including former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson in 2012 and 2016.

Johnson won nearly 3.3% of the popular vote — the best performance ever for a Libertarian presidential nominee — in 2016. Four years later, the less-known Jorgensen, a university lecturer, won 1.1%, the second-best percentage for a party that’s rarely broken 1%.

“The history of the Libertarian Party has been a struggle between purists, who are focused on ideological consistency ... and pragmatists, who believe in that philosophy but prioritize, if not winning elections, then attracting enough attention and enough votes to be viable for the next election,” said Christopher Devine, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Dayton who has studied the party extensively.

High-level success remains elusive. Last year, U.S. Rep. Justin Amash of Michigan, a former Republican, became the first-ever Libertarian in Congress but didn’t seek reelection after flirting with a presidential run.

In-office switches are also how the party has gained most of its state legislators over the last decade and how it achieved its first statewide office anywhere: In 2018, New Mexico Public Lands Commissioner Aubrey Dunn switched from the Republican Party. He also didn’t run again.

Building on limited local success

Several Libertarians said they saw better growth opportunities at the local and state levels, where the party could expand its pipeline more easily and build for the future.

At least 241 Libertarians now hold elected offices, per the party’s count, with more than half occupying nonpartisan posts. The number has been higher before and is on an upswing lately. Colorado’s local Libertarian leaders have tended to be in small towns, with no legislators. A notable — if short-lived — curiosity occurred in 2001, when Libertarians took four of seven seats on the Leadville City Council for about a year.

Laura Ebke, who switched from Republican to Libertarian in 2016 while serving in the officially nonpartisan Nebraska Legislature, said she was heartened to watch last fall as Wyoming Libertarian Marshall Burt won a state House seat last fall. He beat a longtime Democratic incumbent in a two-way race.

Burt campaigns on issues that resonated in his rural district, including economic development, education and gun rights. He was the first Libertarian to win a state legislative election in 20 years.

Ebke, now an at-large member of the Libertarian National Committee, knows first-hand how difficult it is to even get into office — and how the Libertarian label can be a liability.

She lost her reelection bid in 2018 in a hard-fought campaign in part because of rising Trump support, she said. But Republican-backed mailers also tarred her by seizing on the party’s hard-line positions, including on immigration. One portrayed her as erasing the border with Mexico even though she’d have no say over national policy.

To counter that, Ebke said, Libertarian candidates need to engage with the politics of the moment and not just articulate lofty goals.

“Many of my Libertarian friends don’t understand this, but when you start getting too deep into the philosophical stuff (of the party), people’s eyes glaze over,” she said. “You’ve got to meet people at the door where they are ... and start to articulate a Libertarian solution for their problems. When we learn to do that, we’ll start winning.”

