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Can Libertarian nominees Gary Johnson and Bill Weld siphon votes from Trump?

On paper, they make up the most formidable Libertarian ticket ever. But they still need to make the leap to seriousness.

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ORLANDO, Fla. — Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson seized the Libertarian nomination for president at the party's national convention this weekend and escaped a hotly contested convention with his hand-picked running mate, former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld.

The pair form a political team of two former Republican governors that Johnson declared to be the most formidable third-party ticket in the modern era, one that he promised would thrust Libertarians from the fringe of American politics to "major party status" in a period of widespread mistrust of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

With Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton registering as two of the least liked and most mistrusted politicians in the country, many Libertarians see an opening — and a desire — for an alternative. And Johnson is the only other candidate likely to appear on the ballot in every state.

Raising more money is supposed to be the big advantage of selecting Weld, who served as a fundraiser for Mitt Romney. "He really likes fundraising and he's connected," Johnson said. "And I really hate fundraising and I'm not connected."

Their goal, in particular, is to loosen the wallets of the many disaffected and libertarian-leaning Republicans turned off by Trump's bombastic rhetoric and shifting policy stands by offering them an alternative of two former Republican governors.

Ed Crane, the co-founder and former president of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute who ran a seven-figure super PAC for Rand Paul, told POLITICO he planned to revive his Purple PAC group on behalf of Johnson, now that he's officially the Libertarian nominee.

"We could raise millions and I think it's a very unique opportunity that you have have two major party candidates who are incredibly unpopular within their own parties," Crane said. "It won't take me long because I've got the numbers of all the major hitters on the libertarian side."

Even so, Johnson and Weld now head a deeply divided party, and many of the Libertarian faithful gathered in Orlando were resistant to being dragged anywhere near the mainstream. . It

took both Johnson and Weld, who were approved in separate votes, two ballots each to win their nominations; Weld won a squeaker with 50.6 percent of the vote.

Delegates also booed Johnson multiple times at the final presidential debate Saturday night — for suggesting the government have a role in issuing drivers' licenses, for saying he would have signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and for talking about curbing carbon emissions.

“We’re at a threshold here,” Johnson implored the crowd, “a real threshold to grow this party.”

It didn’t help matters visually that the Libertarians shared the convention complex with a comic convention, with costumed political activists intermingling with sci-fi fans dressed as ninjas, hobbits and storm troopers. “Acid flashback!” shouted John McAfee, one of Johnson’s challengers, when he ran into an oversize man dressed as Hagrid from *Harry Potter*.

“Vermin Supreme has lost his pink pony sash,” the chairman of the Libertarian Party, Nicholas Sarwark, announced from the dais at one point, referring to the gadfly candidate known for wearing a rubber boot on his head.

In other words, Libertarians aren’t about to stop being offbeat, and neither is Johnson, who roamed the convention halls in a suit, tie and Nike sneakers. In the years since his last presidential run, Johnson served as CEO of a cannabis company, though he has pledged not to use marijuana in the White House, if elected.

If all goes according to plan for Johnson in the coming months, he said that he would be in a position to plant a kiss on Trump’s cheek during a debate this fall, as he has to other rivals in the past.

“It’s perfect. No, I’m serious. It’s perfect,” Johnson told POLITICO. “It is the most disarming gesture. You know, treat the bully with love.”

Johnson has already landed his lips on an opponent once this cycle (and he kissed this reporter on the cheek to end an interview after he was asked about his debate-kissing habit). At a Libertarian debate earlier this month, Johnson walked over and kissed McAfee as he was being quizzed about his Belizean rap sheet (it included being a “person of interest” in his neighbor’s murder and a fugitive).

But before Johnson, who drew less than 1 percent of the vote as the Libertarian nominee in 2012, gets his shot at Trump’s jowls, he’ll have to actually get on the general election debate stage, a feat no third-party candidate has achieved since 1992. And to do that he’ll have to climb to 15 percent in the national polls — the cutoff set by the presidential debate commission. And to do all that, he’ll need a whole lot more money than his shoestring campaign has raised.

“It’s a chicken and egg thing,” said Matt Kibbe, a self-described “recovering Republican” who headed a super PAC for Rand Paul earlier this cycle but attended and spoke at the weekend’s Libertarian convention. “I think a lot of significant donors would consider the Libertarian ticket if it demonstrated competitiveness.”

So far, when Johnson's been included in polling, he's shown notable strength, pulling 10 percent in one Fox News poll, 10 percent in a Morning Consult survey and 11 percent in a Monmouth University poll back in March.

But even Johnson's longtime fiancée, Kate Prusack, said his strong early showings said less about him and more about Trump and Clinton. "I think it's mostly because because people really don't like both of them," she said.

Among the potential disaffected Republican donors to Johnson so far are people like Paul and Laura Holmes Jost, who gave nearly a half-million dollars to Paul's super PACs. They attended the Libertarian convention this weekend and had a private sit-down with Johnson. Laura was impressed with him, though less so the convention attendees: "I'm surprised they are more interested in having a debate club than a political party."

Both Josts said they were writing Johnson maximum \$2,700 checks on Sunday night and planned to explore hosting a fundraiser for him in the future.

Most potential financiers of a Libertarian ticket understand the goal isn't so much to win the White House but to spread their limited government, socially liberal, fiscally conservative, anti-war, pro-drug legalization message into the national consciousness. But for some there is a concern about the standard-bearer they have selected, despite his resume, especially if the goal is to get on the debate stage.

"I would say Gary Johnson has a bigger problem than the no-money problem. He's not a good speaker and he's not a good debater," said Frayda Levin, an influential libertarian-leaning Republican donor who has hosted Johnson at her home. "...I personally would put money behind a Libertarian candidate if I thought that, when they were in that debate, they could make this case and shake up the debate, even if they had no chance of winning, I would gladly put money behind — I just don't think Gary Johnson's that guy."

"No, he's not charismatic. I would agree with that," Crane said of Johnson. "But he's honest which puts him far ahead of the other two. I'll take honest over charismatic."

The biggest fundraising prize would be the billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, who have generously funded libertarian-infused think tanks and causes for years, along with Republican political campaigns. David Koch himself was on the Libertarian ticket in 1980. And Sarwark, the Libertarian Party chair, said they had made "back-channel" efforts to reach out to the Kochs. But the Koch brothers have denied any involvement with Johnson's bid.

"Rumors that Charles or David Koch have engaged in discussions or have pledged their support to Gary Johnson — or any candidate running for president for that matter — are untrue," said spokesman Ken Spain.

Still, these are heady times for a party that saw its highest vote total ever under Johnson four years ago—even though it was less than one percent of the national total—and in April, the party's committee topped \$200,000 in fundraising, its biggest monthly haul in more than a decade. Roughly 250 reporters were credentialed for their 2016 convention, up for two-dozen four years ago.

In that way, he's already farther ahead than he ever got in 2012.

“There's no question that both Trump and Clinton are polarizing but for people to choose Gary Johnson they need to know that he's running,” said Roger Stone, who advised Johnson's Libertarian bid in 2012 and is now a supporter and informal adviser to Trump. “Four years ago, 75 percent of the voters told us they wished there was another choice. Well, there was another choice it's just that nobody knew about it.”