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Gary Johnson sets sights on 15 percent in polls, crucial spot on debate stage

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With an electorate totally disenchanted with the two major parties' offerings, Libertarian Party presidential nominee Gary Johnson has a unique chance to make a splash this year — and he's determined to do things differently than in his 2012 campaign.

Gone are the low-yield interviews with "internet radio" shows, and Mr. Johnson also says he'll probably skip out on trolling the Democratic and Republican conventions.

More significantly, he said he'll probably reverse his 2012 decision and reject public financing this year, instead trying to raise his own campaign cash.

"The target is tens of millions of dollars, and we need to show that or we're not credible," Mr. Johnson told The Washington Times. "That's just the reality."

He sat down with The Washington Times a week after he won the Libertarian Party's presidential nomination for a second election in a row, and insisted this year is different, both because he's better prepared and because Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have chased voters out of their own parties.

One major difference this time is that Mr. Johnson, a former two-term governor of New Mexico, has former Massachusetts Gov. Bill Weld as his running mate.

Not only do they each have more executive elected experience than either Mrs. Clinton or Mr. Trump, but Mr. Weld's presence has already helped the ticket line up meetings with potential financiers.

And the Libertarians are getting outside help from political action committees that know how to play the game.

Ed Crane, the founder and president emeritus of the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank, said recently that he's switching his Purple PAC group, which had backed Sen. Rand Paul's 2016 GOP presidential campaign, to be a pro-Johnson outfit.

"I think there's going to be significant money outside of the campaign," said Mr. Crane. "The purpose of all the PACs, as far as I am concerned at this juncture, is to raise Gary's profile to the point where he gets 15 percent in the polls or more and, therefore, is in the debates."

Matt Kibbe, who left the conservative advocacy group FreedomWorks last year to work on the pro-Paul Concerned American Voters group, also recently started an outside group called AlternativePAC in an effort to boost Mr. Johnson's candidacy.

Both Mr. Crane and Mr. Kibbe said in addition to swaying middle-of-the-road voters, Mr. Johnson can also win over disaffected supporters of Sen. Bernard Sanders who are fed up with politics as usual.

“This ticket has appeal potentially across the political spectrum,” Mr. Kibbe said, saying one goal is to target millennials who have been turned off by Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton.

He said he hopes to raise \$1 million in the next few weeks and \$4 million to \$5 million for the cycle.

“Once he’s in the debates, the money’s just going to pour in,” Mr. Crane said. “Because if you have Gary Johnson — smart, knowledgeable, honest — up against Hillary and Trump on the same platform, the best candidate will be so obvious to the average American that it should be a unique point in American political history.”

The Real Clear Politics average of polls puts Mr. Johnson at 8.5 percent support nationally — when he’s included in the polling. In state polling he runs as high as 16 percent in Utah, but is in the low- or mid-single digits in key Electoral College battlegrounds such as Florida and Georgia.

Mr. Johnson acknowledged he can’t make a credible run if he doesn’t get into the presidential debates — and that means he must poll at least 15 percent. He says with the unpopularity of Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton, it should be possible to break that threshold this year.

“We’d be at a level where we’d be in the debates, and if that happens, anything is possible, meaning getting elected is possible,” he said.

Mr. Johnson makes the case that he and Mr. Weld occupy a space between the more unpalatable aspects of the two major parties. That’s a shift from the place small-government libertarians have historically occupied somewhere firmly on the conservative end of the political spectrum.

“Bill Weld and I you could label as kind of moderate Libertarians — kind of puts us smack in the middle, trying or believing that, really, we’re the voice of the majority of Americans,” Mr. Johnson said.

But on free trade, one of the Libertarian Party’s chief issues, primary voters have been hesitant to fully embrace recent agreements, and both Mr. Trump and Mr. Sanders have made opposition to free trade pacts key planks in their respective campaigns.

Mr. Johnson said free trade should be pursued, but that what politicians label “free trade” is often dressed-up crony capitalism and ends up giving an advantage to people who have money.

“Regulation that might actually get passed that would level the playing field — yeah, you bet,” he said. “That is something that government can do. So not making promises that more jobs are

going to get created, but making promises that in office you can level the playing field, and that ultimately that will lead to many, many jobs.”

Mr. Trump, meanwhile, has dismissed Mr. Johnson as a “fringe” candidate. That’s a label Mr. Johnson embraced — albeit perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

“Really, a completely accurate portrayal,” he said. “He was talking about both Bill Weld and myself — two Republican governors serving in heavily blue states, being fiscally conservative yeah, we’re totally fringe. Totally.”

Mr. Johnson called Mr. Trump’s campaign rhetoric “incendiary” and said even when he says something somewhat agreeable to libertarians, like advocating a noninterventionist foreign policy, he’s liable to just contradict himself later.

“Killing the families of Muslim terrorists. Bringing back waterboarding or worse, calling a judge in California Mexican — this is incendiary stuff,” Mr. Johnson said.

Taking a page from Mr. Sanders, Mr. Johnson also says he’s not calling out Mrs. Clinton for the private email server she used as secretary of state, and which is currently the subject of an FBI investigation.

But he said people could expect to see the government grow and pay more taxes if she’s elected, and that she has been the architect of a lackluster U.S. foreign policy.

Mr. Johnson also gave Mr. Sanders some praise for coming around on the issue of marijuana legalization, which Mr. Johnson has advocated for some time. While campaigning in California recently, Mr. Sanders said he’d support a ballot item on legalizing the drug.

“There’s not one politician outside of Bernie Sanders at the congressional, senatorial or gubernatorial level that has advocated legalization of marijuana other than myself and that’s a recent phenomenon for Bernie,” Mr. Johnson said.

“To me, that’s just a disconnect in a big, big, big way,” he said.

Mr. Johnson said that, beyond marijuana, he’d support decriminalizing drug use in general.

“I’m not advocating the legalization of any drug other than marijuana, but I think this country is going to take a quantum leap in understanding drugs and drug abuse, and I think the next logical step, which I completely support, is decriminalizing drug use,” he said. “And I would support that — I would always support that.”