



Libertarian Unlikely at Debates

Mark Silva

August 30, 2016

Libertarian Gary Johnson, campaigning for president with pledges to get government out of peoples' pocketbooks and bedrooms, has drawn the support of roughly one in 10 American voters surveyed.

Yet this isn't enough to earn Johnson a place on stage at the first presidential debate between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump. And experts say it's highly unlikely, between now and the mid-September cutoff for debate qualification, that Johnson will find the 15-percent public support required.

In a year when most voters voice disapproval of the major parties' nominees, third-and fourth-party contenders have fared unusually well in polls. But without a prominent public platform such as the three nationally televised debates this fall, observers say it's unlikely that these candidates can pose anything more than a spoiler-threat to Clinton or Trump in some tightly contested states.

Together, Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein have attracted as much as 17 percent in public surveys this summer — suggesting a substantial public appetite for an alternative to Clinton or Trump. Yet alone, Johnson has drawn an average of just 10 percent in the most recent media polls that the nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates is monitoring in preparation for the first debate Sept. 26 — the same 10 percent average he held earlier this summer.

“The probability of Johnson going from 10 to 15 percent is low,” says Darrell West, vice president for governance studies at The Brookings Institution in Washington. “He doesn't get much media coverage and hasn't done much to draw attention to himself and his issues. It takes a lot to move the polls, and I don't see him doing the kinds of things that would attract voters.”

Lacking the media exposure and money of the major parties' nominees — the saturation news coverage cable TV has devoted to Trump's astonishing campaign, or the \$150 million that Clinton's campaign is investing in TV ads through the fall — a candidate such as Johnson faces a difficult task in broadening his base of support. The Libertarian has reported raising just \$3 million for his campaign.

Purple PAC, a super-PAC founded by Edward Crane, a former CEO of the Cato Institute and investments manager, is airing cable TV ads backing Johnson in hope of boosting his bid for a

debate seat. The narrator of the latest ad picturing Trump and Clinton says: “One candidate offends everyone... The other will say anything to get elected... America deserves better.”

It’s arguable that, with voters seeking an alternative, the Green Party’s Stein is denying Johnson some of the support he might find to earn a place in debates.

In the latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll in early August, Johnson drew 10 percent, Stein 5. In the latest CNN/ORC poll at the end of July: Johnson 9, Stein 5. In the latest ABC News/Washington poll in early August: Johnson 8, Stein 4. In the other two polls the debate commission is watching — CBS News/New York Times and FOX News surveys — Johnson drew 12 percent in mid-July and early August.

Johnson’s average among the five monitored polls is 10 percent. In about four dozen independent polls reported since early July, he has averaged 8 percent.

Clinton has led the field of four candidates in almost all polling since the parties’ summer conventions, running 4 points ahead of Trump on average.

James Warren, media columnist for The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, one of the preeminent centers for journalism studies, says of Johnson and Stein: “In a poll-driven media culture, they are screwed so far.”

“Are those low numbers a metaphysically certain reflection of lack of support?” Warren asks. “Or, perhaps, in part a reflection of a certain methodological inattention to their candidacies? It’s unclear to me if it follows that huge chagrin with Clinton and Trump translates to a potentially substantial positive vote for the third-party rivals. But, as Trump’s very candidacy proves, free media time is of huge potential benefit. So far, the press has by and large decided (Johnson and Stein) are irrelevant.”

Johnson, a former New Mexico governor who won 1 percent of the presidential vote as the Libertarian nominee in 2012, has acknowledged that he cannot possibly win election without a place in debates. Yet winning, he insists, is possible.

“The object is to win outright,” he said on FOX News Sunday. “And it’s not impossible if we go into the presidential debates with the polarization of Clinton and Trump that we might actually run the table on all of this.”

Campaigning with running mate William Weld, a former governor of Massachusetts, Johnson asked a cheering crowd in Boston on Saturday: “Is this the craziest election ever? And you know how crazy it is? I’m going to be the next president of the United States.”

Johnson, who advocates legalization of marijuana, says he has abstained from it during this campaign and vows to remain pot-free if elected president. He calls for abolishment of personal and corporate income taxes and less regulation.

His supporters are younger on average than those siding with Clinton or Trump, the Pew Research Center found in its most recent survey. Nearly one third (32 percent) are younger than 30 — roughly twice the share of Clinton’s under-30 support. Only 29 percent of Johnson’s supporters are 50 or older, compared with 50 percent of Clinton’s and 63 percent of Trump’s.

If Johnson's supporters had to choose either Clinton or Trump, Pew also reports, they'd mostly split fairly evenly: 43 percent choosing Clinton, 42 percent Trump. In its Aug. 9-16 survey, the first in which Pew tested a four-way contest, Johnson was chosen by 10 percent of all registered voters. The margin of error: 2.8 percent.

This marks a major step forward for any Libertarian. Since the party's first appearance on presidential ballots in 1972, its candidates never have garnered more than 1 percent of the popular vote. Ron Paul, the former Texas congressman who ran as a Libertarian in 1988, won 0.47 percent of the vote that year.

Since 1988, when the Commission on Presidential Debates started sponsoring national face-offs, a third-party candidate has appeared on stage only one year. Ross Perot, who joined the debates in 1992, won 19 percent of the vote that year. But by 1996, absent from debates, he won just 8.4 percent.

Johnson lacks the personal drawing power that stronger third-party candidates have possessed, Brookings' West suggests. "He doesn't have the folksy manner of a Ross Perot or the hard edge of a George Wallace," West says. "Those are the types of candidates who have done well."

The commission sets the rules for debates — the first at Hofstra University on Long Island, the second at Washington University in St. Louis on Oct. 4, the final one at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas Oct. 19. Before the second and third debates, the latest polling will be reevaluated to see who qualifies.

Yet as Johnson awaits early September results of the five benchmark surveys, experts say his share is more likely to shrink than grow. Neil Newhouse, a Virginia-based pollster who advised Mitt Romney in 2012, says that with third-party candidates "what we've generally found is that their support declines as you get closer to Election Day, as voters don't want to 'waste' their votes."

And if Johnson is counting on a sudden escalation in media exposure before the next round of surveys, the Trump-Clinton clash still is monopolizing the media.

"Especially given the vast unease with the two major party candidates, it's unfortunate that so few people have so scant an idea of what these others believe and represent, so they could at least make an informed assessment," Warren says.

"The commission has their arbitrary requirements," he says. "It does raise the possibility that somebody gets shafted. And, of course, the two major parties have a load of self-interested reasons not to want to have either Johnson or Stein within 10 miles of those stages. Too much unpredictability."