



Is Gary Johnson America's Antidote to Donald Trump?

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Following a campaign rally in Boston Saturday—the final stop on a four-day swing through New England ostensibly aimed at boosting his numbers in national presidential polls—former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson answered thusly when I asked what he thought about the crowd that had turned out for the Libertarian Party candidate:

"Oh, this is *so cool*," he grinned, his eyes darting around like a kid who didn't expect everyone his mom invited to show up to his birthday party.

Flanked by his running mate, former Massachusetts governor Bill Weld, Johnson spoke to the fans spread across the lawn in Boston Common with characteristic ho-hum-ness, the sun creating long shadows under the dome of the bandstand. At one point, a trio of youthful bros stopped in the middle of the crowd with GoPros and cameras rolling while one upended a carton of milk over his head and clothes. I honestly had no idea why it was happening, especially on such a humid, cloudless day, but the [first YouTube hit](#) that came up explained simply: "Why *not* dump a 1/2 gallon of white milk on your head?" Let Liberty reign.

The milk dumping very well could have been the most exciting moment of the rally. When capriciousness becomes the standard bearer of politicking, as it has in this election cycle, anything resembling policy proposals or ideas—like, say, the Johnson-Weld plan to balance the budget in the first 100 days of their administration—has the rhetorical ripple effect of a single Cheerio landing in a swimming pool filled with porridge. And depending on the level of cynicism voters have accumulated by the time they head to the polls this fall, this could be a boon or a bummer for the Libertarians and their supporters .

A [Quinnipiac University survey](#) released last week found the Libertarian candidate hovering around 10 percent—an impressive number for a third-party candidate whose name recognition registers at just 30 percent. The latter number continues to dog Johnson: After the rally Saturday, an old man in a Corvette T-shirt approached to inquire about the commotion; upon learning that it was a campaign for one Gary Johnson, the man caustically scoffed, "Who?"

But while the poll numbers alone are a victory for Johnson—at this time in the 2012 race, his support was hovering around 4 percent—the Libertarian remains mostly a non-factor in this year's presidential race. At this point, the main goal for Libertarians is to get their candidate into the debates, which means boosting Johnson past the 15 percent polling threshold required to get onstage. This goal was the fuel driving last week's mad dash through New England, reflected in the rabid chanting and pre-made placards demanding #LetGaryDebate. (Although the slogan was perhaps less memorable than #FeelTheJohnson, which Johnson reacted to with a giggle every time he saw it.)

"I've voted for the Green Party in the last five elections," said Bob, a 63-year-old newspaper deliveryman brandishing a handmade, quasi-Trump-supporting placard and dispensing rants about the destructive nature of PC culture to anyone who would listen. "I think it's unfair [that] you have to have 15 percent to get in the debates. Just put [the other parties] on stage and let's debate."

If Johnson and his supporters can pull it off, a three-way debate would likely create a powder-keg moment in an already phantasmagorical election. The last third-party candidate to get on was Ross Perot, in 1992—and if you're too young to remember the chaos and weirdness of those debate nights, let me direct your attention to YouTube.

"You have to have more parties participating so that Republicans and Democrats don't have supreme power," said David Toll, 60, a retired carpenter who drove up from Manchester, Connecticut, to see Johnson on the bandstand. "They always just wind up fighting each other."

"People say, 'Well there's this one aspect of the Libertarian party I don't agree with, so a vote for them is throwing it away,'" Toll said. But, he added, "how many Democrats or Republicans totally agree with their party or candidate? Especially *this* election?"

With his Lorazepam-style stage presence, the contrast between Johnson and Republican nominee Donald Trump—in everything from style, to ideas and experience—could not be starker. "Is this the craziest election ever?" the Libertarian candidate asked the crowd in Boston. "The craziest part is I'm going to be the next president!" It was a self-assured statement, without the self-assurance characteristic of almost any politician, let alone the reality-TV megalomaniac who's this year's Republican presidential candidate. And yet, it is this very contrast that Johnson's supporters see as the candidate's greatest strength.

"Trump is an extremist and ideologue," said Thomas Simmons, a former community college economics professor who was at Saturday's rally handing out stickers and pamphlets for his Libertarian congressional campaign. "A lot of people do not trust Hillary Clinton and her connections with corporations and banks internationally, I think voters are looking for someone that's moderate, middle of the road, rational, and reflects people's values. And these guys do."

Perhaps. If Johnson's recent rise in the polls and new influx of cash—the campaign has surpassed \$2.9 million dollars in donations so far this month—are any indication, he has been relatively successful in attracting voters who have soured on the two-party system. Other conservatives have mobilized around him as a Never Trump alternative. According to the Washington Post, the

libertarian-leaning Purple PAC, a group run by former Cato Institute president Ed Crane, has taken out a \$1 million ad buy lauding Johnson as the "honorable choice" for free-market liberty-lovers, and former FreedomWorks president Matt Kibbe plans to spend \$50,000 on a pro-Johnson web campaign aimed at millennials.

Canvassing the platoons of young people rallying for Johnson in Boston this weekend, it was clear that the Libertarian ticket is already winning over voters who might otherwise have gotten behind Trump. "I was very much an anti-Bernie guy myself," Alec, a 19-year-old who traveled from western Massachusetts to attend the Boston rally. "If anything I was leaning to Trump for a while, but realized he doesn't fit my beliefs as closely as I'd like. I believe in social freedom and economic freedom, and neither Trump nor Hillary really represents those things to me."

Nick, another 19-year-old from western Massachusetts, concurred. "I like the whole personal freedoms side of Libertarian ideas," he said. "You know, pro-choice, pro-cannabis, own your guns legally. I had no candidate [before] Johnson, so if he gets into the debates, I'd vote for him. If not, I'll probably vote for Trump, unfortunately."

But if Johnson is going to tap the tree of Trump for votes, he's going to have to rise above the noise while on the trail. And as he faces off against two major-party candidates known to every voter in America—and whom he trails by more than 20 points in all national polls—Johnson continues to campaign like a guy who doesn't think he'll break 10 percent.

On the campaign trail, he tends to leave the more advanced politicking to Weld, a former Republican whose past support for things like the United Nations and gun control have rankled libertarian hardliners. Calling Johnson an "undiscovered national treasure," Weld alluded to his running mate's low-key vibe Saturday, running through a list of his athletic accomplishments—a regular Ironman competitor, Johnson has climbed the highest peak on all seven continents—before joking that, "You have to beat these stories out of him."

In turn, Johnson, despite his reputation, comes off almost like an old-school politician—a sort of Libertarian John Kasich, with a better temper. But as refreshing as that might be to those exhausted by the gutter-politics of the 2016 election cycle, it's unlikely to hold up in a race where Trump's enflamed Zeppelin continues to suck up any oxygen left in the news cycle. So while Johnson's lack of sparkle and rhetorical zeal may have, paradoxically, improved his standing over his last presidential race, it also means that the Libertarian ticket will likely remain little more than a sane, and slightly stoned, sideshow in the 2016 circus.