

## **Will voters be swayed by Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson?**

*A live town hall event broadcast Wednesday evening will feature Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson and his running mate, William Weld.*

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At 9 p.m. Eastern time Wednesday, Americans can tune in to watch a presidential hopeful who's received significantly less media attention than his bipartisan competitors: Gary Johnson, former Republican governor of New Mexico and 2016 candidate for the Libertarian Party.

Mr. Johnson and his running mate, former Republican Massachusetts Gov. Bill Weld, will field questions from voters in a live town hall event broadcast on CNN and moderated by CNN's Chris Cuomo.

The event is important, in part, because it's an opportunity for Johnson to expand his support among American voters. If Weld and Johnson's support reaches 15 percent, they qualify for the scheduled autumn presidential debates. Current general election polls show the Libertarian candidates drawing about 9 percent overall.

This is Johnson's second run for the Libertarian Party (LP): in 2012, he set the record for most votes earned by a Libertarian candidate in the general election, coming in third with 1.27 million votes — more than double what his predecessor, LP candidate Bob Barr, earned in 2008.

Even then, Johnson only earned about 1 percent of the vote.

But interest in the Libertarian Party seems to have surged for the 2016 election, as Johnson prepares to go up against two polarizing candidates with low favorability ratings: presumptive GOP nominee Donald Trump, and presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

Following Mr. Trump's win in Indiana last month, membership applications for the Libertarian Party doubled, the Washington Examiner reported, and Google searches for

"Libertarian Party" and "Gary Johnson" skyrocketed, causing conservative news site Breitbart to encourage its readers to "panic."

“Libertarians are not conservatives. They’re not just Republicans repulsed by Trump’s racial and religious scapegoating and megalomania,” writes David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, for The Daily Beast.

The Libertarian Party platform has "for decades" supported ideas that directly contradict traditional conservative stances, such as the legalization of drugs and gay marriage, and opposition to most US wars, Mr. Boaz notes.

But, he continues, "given what Sasse, Romney, and other serious Republicans think of Trump and Clinton, is it hard to imagine that they would prefer Johnson and Weld in the White House?"

Johnson's campaign has caught the attention of disenchanted Republicans and Democrats alike, particularly supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders: a recent Bloomberg poll found that 18 percent of Sanders's supporters say they plan to vote for the Libertarian candidate in November, rather than vote for Hillary Clinton.

Johnson has been more favorably received by the general public than most Libertarian candidates, but many members of the party itself are not quite as enthused. He just barely earned the nomination at the party's convention in May, scraping by with 55.8 percent of the vote on the second ballot, and was booed by the crowd when he voiced support for driver licenses and the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The Libertarian candidate's support of certain anti-discrimination laws and willingness to talk about issues such as the threat of militant Islamists have also drawn criticism from members of the party. At the same time, these views may make him more palatable to a mainstream audience, says Brian Doherty, senior editor at Reason magazine and author of "Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement."

“A lot of libertarians in the party, what they really want the most is not someone who’s going to get the most votes or raise the most money, but someone who represents their vision of what libertarianism is with clarity and lack of compromise,” says Mr. Doherty in a phone interview with The Christian Science Monitor.

Johnson's self-described "pragmatic" campaigning strategy, which lacks "principled statements" and core libertarian "lingo," has raised concerns from party members who "get the sense that Gary doesn't believe [in a lack of government intervention] as a matter of core principle, that he's just an intelligent guy who happens to notice that most of the time, government doesn't work very well," Doherty says.

However, he points out, Johnson needs to earn million of votes in the general election. There are only about 250,000 voters registered to the Libertarian Party, according to the party's website.

As Johnson's focus changes from getting the Libertarian nomination to earning general election votes, "the party kind of becomes irrelevant," Doherty says. "He can't worry about the party faithful any longer. There's just not enough of them."

Part of Johnson's attempt to appeal to a mainstream audience involves his use of the phrase "fiscally conservative and socially liberal" to describe the party. It's a "best of both worlds" pitch that may appear to describe a lot of Americans.

However, as The Christian Science Monitor's Francine Kiefer reported in May, this ideology may also come with challenges in attracting voters, as Democrats who appreciate Libertarian social stances also value the role of the government in working toward social justice. On the other end of the spectrum, #NeverTrump conservatives may agree with downsizing government and cutting taxes, but might disagree with cutting military spending, as Johnson proposes.

In an election where personalities have taken priority in the media, the demeanor of third-party candidates is bound to play a role, as well as policy.

"[Johnson] doesn't have that sort of fire-behind-the-podium feel that both Trump and Hillary, in different ways, can get. He's just kind of a really reasonable guy," Doherty says. "He's going to be who he is. And I think he's hoping there's a mass of Americans who want quiet, mellow, and reasonable. We'll find out if he's right or not."