

National Journal

What Libertarians Learned From Gary Johnson

The nominee could represent progress or a missed opportunity.

October 31, 2016

Gary Johnson still thinks this could have worked.

The Libertarian nominee for president knows he won't become commander in chief next year. The avid outdoorsman, sporting jeans in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel in downtown D.C. last week, told *National Journal* he was looking forward to "skiing 120 days this upcoming season" in his adopted hometown of Taos, New Mexico.

But even as Johnson's campaign hobbles across the finish line—eclipsed by Evan McMullin as the third-party candidate most likely to win Electoral College votes and dogged by questions about his grasp of policy nuances—the former governor insists more money, better press coverage, and a slight difference in polling practices could have propelled him to the presidency.

Johnson's analysis of what went wrong is, at points, light on details. During a half-hour interview, he reported that his only regret from the controversy-filled campaign was having participated in a primary debate he recalled as "not honorable." He volunteered that "not one single national poll has been conducted" that included his name in the first horse-race question, and argued he would be winning the race now if polls had been conducted and reported on correctly.

Presented later with a series of polls that defy his argument, Johnson's campaign responded that the candidate "may have generalized," but that "numerous polls" don't include him in their first questions and "that has to have an impact on results."

Regardless, for Johnson, hope springs eternal. His primary lesson from this campaign is "just how rigged" the process is, but he sees a path forward for Libertarians through the same system.

If he can reach 5 percent of the vote this year (something he describes as "a very lesser goal"), Johnson sees an influx of federal funds catapulting the Libertarian Party into contention in national elections and "a slew" of former Democratic and Republican officials converting to libertarianism.

Johnson, 63, puts the odds of a Libertarian becoming president in his lifetime at one-in-five.

"I think we may have blazed a trail that will allow people to get elected as Libertarians. We'll see," he said.

That question is likely to captivate libertarian activists, intellectuals, and operatives in the aftermath of this election: How can any Libertarian ticket succeed where the Johnson-Bill Weld campaign failed? And if the party couldn't break into the mainstream of American political discourse

in a year when the major parties nominated two of the most disliked candidates in the history of polling, is a Libertarian presidential ticket a helpful means for advancing libertarian ideas?

The answer depends, in part, on the complicated question of whether Johnson's campaign is judged as a record-setting success or as an embarrassing failure to take advantage of an unprecedented opportunity.

To longtime Libertarian Party activists, Johnson's campaign looks like progress—he is on track to receive more votes than any nominee in party history and has raised the party's profile in the process. Libertarian Party Chairman Nicholas Sarwark said the party is poised to raise \$3 million this year, twice as much as the 2012 total, while doubling the number of active donors. To Sarwark and others, the path forward is simple: Continue building on the successful growth of the Johnson campaign.

“On Nov. 9th, I go back to work building a party across all 50 states,” Sarwark said.

But to observers such as Randy Barnett, a lawyer and libertarian activist often critical of the Libertarian Party organization, Johnson's campaign points to a fundamental shortcoming in the party as currently constituted.

“After being in existence for 40-some-odd years, the Libertarian Party was not prepared with a candidate to take advantage of what has to be a historic opportunity for it,” Barnett said. “If it can't do well this year, I can't imagine a year in which it would have a better chance.”

Much of the debate will likely focus on how much of the blame for Johnson's failures to put on the candidate. Many Libertarian Party activists—and Johnson himself—focused on other factors: the strength of the two-party system, the way the press covered Johnson, the 15 percent polling threshold to qualify for the debate stage, and the campaign's limited financial resources.

Daniel Hayes of the Libertarian National Committee explained Johnson's missteps on foreign policy, in part, by pointing out that Johnson did not receive the same national security briefings as Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Former Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, who was the Libertarian Party nominee for president in 1988 and sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2008 and 2012, said the odds were against Johnson from the start. “Even when Gary was up at 11 and 12 and 13 percent, I said, ‘He's not going to be there in the end.’ It never is,” Paul said. “The people are convinced there are two monsters out there and you have to pick which monsters you want. It's a system that's tough to overcome, and there's no easy answer to it other than what I believe, which is you have to work through the area of ideas.”

Others, though, pointed to Johnson's personal shortcomings as a candidate, leaving open the possibility that a more articulate or disciplined candidate could break through in the future. Johnson has been, by his own admission, an imperfect messenger throughout the campaign, at times inattentive to details and imprecise with language in ways that led to better punchlines than press releases.

Most notably, he has repeatedly struggled to answer detailed questions on foreign policy. Supporters argued Johnson's mistakes are blown out of proportion and don't reflect his grasp on foreign affairs broadly, but they meshed with a perception that he was disengaged on global issues.

Asked last week to describe how he prepared for foreign policy questions after spending most of his career focused on domestic issues, Johnson described his strategy as "just to the best of my ability getting up to speed" and emphasized the need to "always ground whatever you do in honesty and telling the truth."

He mentioned his opposition to the Iraq War, but didn't use the issue to claim particular knowledge on foreign policy, saying instead: "At that time ... I was echoing the Cato Institute and what they had to say about it."

Matt Welch, editor at large of *Reason*, a libertarian magazine, said he is concerned that Johnson "reinforced a stereotype of libertarians not having a sophisticated grasp of what's happening in the world."

Emily Ekins, a pollster and research fellow at the Cato Institute, said one of the primary lessons of this election for libertarians is the need to put forward candidates who can address that stereotype head on. She said they need candidates who are "completely aware—just very, very informed of all of the issues going on in international affairs, in order to belie that assumption that people have."

David Boaz, a vice president at the Cato institute, said he thinks Johnson's campaign has been helpful for raising awareness of libertarian causes, portraying libertarianism as a more mainstream idea, and garnering wider attention in a way future candidates can build on. He even sees Johnson's mistakes as potentially helpful in drawing attention, but noted that "there's better publicity and less good publicity."

Other longtime libertarians will look to the uncertain future of the Republican Party as another opportunity for the movement. Ed Crane, a former Cato Institute president supportive of Johnson's campaign, said he sees Sens. Ben Sasse of Nebraska and Jeff Flake of Arizona as forming "the nucleus of an effort to reform the Republican Party in the way it needs to reform anyway."

In retrospect, Crane objects to the idea that everything had come together this year for libertarian ideas.

"A perfect storm includes the right candidate, so it wasn't the perfect storm," Crane said. "But the ideas are still relevant."