

Conversations with 'Gov. Gary'

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Last fall, GQ ran a profile of former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, then a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, under the headline "Is This the Sanest Man Running for President?" The piece noted that in 2003, Johnson scaled Mount Everest with a broken leg, and in 2005, broke his back paragliding off the highest mountain in Maui. "Sanest"? Well, maybe not.

But Johnson, now running on the Libertarian Party ticket, is certainly the most interesting candidate in the 2012 field -- and that's not an attempt to damn with faint praise.

Yesterday morning, I sat down with "Gov. Gary" to talk about what he hopes to achieve in this race.

The American electoral process almost guarantees third-party failure, says "Duverger's Law," coined by the French political scientist who pointed out that "The plurality (1 winner) voting system tends to lead to a two-party system."

But some of the main obstacles that third parties face are artificial, not structural. "The two old parties have gamed the system," Johnson charges. The Presidential Debates Commission, or CPD, the private group that serves as the gatekeeper for the nationally televised debates, imposes an arbitrary barrier of 15 percent support in three national polls before a candidate can be included. That rule, adopted in 2000, would have barred virtually every third-party candidate in American history. The fix is in, it seems.

Still, getting into the debates is one of Johnson's key goals, and he intends to "kick and claw and scrape" until he hits 15 percent or public pressure forces the CPD to lower the bar: "If I'm in the debate, then the world changes," he insists.

What about the "spoiler" charge -- or, as a Twitter follower of mine phrased it, "why does [Johnson] want four more years of Obama?"

He says he gets that a lot: "The implication of the question is that I'm gonna take votes away from all those ... anti-war, pro-gay marriage Republicans that are currently supporting Romney." Johnson admits that his candidacy hurts Romney in North Carolina, but insists, "I take more votes from Obama in New Mexico."

He's right: Last week the Public Policy Polling firm noted: "Interestingly [Johnson] hurts Obama a little bit more than Romney, pulling the President's lead down to 42-38."

Regardless, he adds, "to heck with all that -- you as a voter should vote your conscience," Johnson argued.

"Vote your conscience, not your fears" was a Ralph Nader slogan in 2000, for a Green Party presidential bid that earned Nader the enmity of liberals for allegedly helping deliver the presidency to George W. Bush.

How much you fear "spoiler" scenarios depends on how stark you consider the difference between 2012's major party standard-bearers. On Sunday, I spotted a minivan bumper sticker that read: "Jesus was a 'community organizer.' Pilate was a governor." Pretty stark!

But you could be forgiven if you don't see the difference between the technocrat who pioneered the individual mandate in Massachusetts and the one who took it federal as one of -- ahem -- Biblical proportions.

Meanwhile, Johnson is "the only candidate who doesn't want to bomb Iran. ... the only candidate who wants to repeal the Patriot Act."

And, as he made clear to me, the only candidate who's committed to abolishing specific agencies: the departments of Education and Homeland Security "for starters." As the final, catchall plank in the LP platform puts it, "Our silence about any other particular law, regulation ... [or] agency ... should not be construed to imply approval."

I don't know that "the world changes" if Johnson manages to claw his way into the debates. But the race would start to get interesting. And interesting is one thing that, right now, it's not.

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