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Amash keeps dropping hints about a Libertarian Party presidential bid

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Justin Amash keeps dropping hints that he is planning to seek the Libertarian Party's presidential nomination.

In a tweet on Monday, the ex-Republican independent Michigan congressman told a fan who asked him to run for president that he is "looking at it closely this week."

Amash's campaign spelled out the meaning of the tweet in a statement Wednesday.

"In mid-February, Justin Amash paused active campaigning for his congressional seat to carefully consider a presidential run," it said. "He has been discussing the potential campaign with his family, his friends, his team, and others, and a decision can be expected soon."

Rumors of a potential Amash presidential bid have been circling for years among Libertarians and their independent and Republican allies. He has repeatedly refused to rule out running for president as a Libertarian in 2020.

To those familiar with Amash's political style, this week's hints look more like big billboards. He is known for being careful and intentional with his public messaging.

"I don't think it was an accident that the tweet that sort of set this all off was in response to a pretty famous libertarian activist, Hannah Cox," said Dan Fishman, executive director of the Libertarian Party, referring to a conservative-libertarian commentator and writer.

On Monday, Amash retweeted an article that the Libertarian Party shared of an opinion piece by the CEO of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, that argued, "There are more libertarians in a pandemic."

Amash, 39, was elected to Congress in the 2010 tea party wave and is a co-founder of the hard-line conservative House Freedom Caucus. But he concluded halfway through President Trump's first term that his Republican colleagues cared less about the principles he holds dear — constitutional order, limited government, economic freedom, and individual liberty — than they do about party loyalty. He "declared his independence" from the GOP in a July 4, 2019, opinion piece, making him the only independent member of the House.

If he launches a presidential bid, Amash will have to answer critics who argue that a strong third-party bid would help Trump and hurt Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden by splitting the anti-Trump vote.

Libertarians are used to the criticism.

“Replacing one elderly, not-quite-all-there guy with a different elderly, not-quite-all-there-guy — I'm not feeling it, and I don't think a lot of the country is feeling it,” said Nicholas Sarwark, national chairman of the Libertarian Party.

Since he left the GOP, Amash faces a tough House reelection bid. A Libertarian has hardly any chance of winning the presidency, but running for president in 2020 could be the most effective way for Amash to advocate for his principles rather than risking losing reelection.

Though it is less than six months before the general election, Amash could have a clear path to the Libertarian Party nomination. The party's convention is scheduled for the end of May in Austin, Texas, but could be pushed back due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The current Libertarian presidential field is full of nationally unknown ideologues and unserious characters. Former Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee dropped out of the race earlier this month. Jim Gray, a Superior Court judge in Orange County, California, from 1989 to 2009, who was Gary Johnson's running mate in 2016, announced a bid on Monday. That arguably makes him the highest-profile politician seeking the nomination. Perennial performance artist candidate Vermin Supreme is in second place in the party's state presidential preference caucuses and primaries.

Unlike the Republican and Democratic parties' processes, the Libertarian Party's state preference contests have no bearing on who ultimately wins the nomination. Delegates at the state convection may vote for whomever they wish, and Amash, a known figure among libertarian activists, could sweep the nomination in a last-minute bid.

Winning the Libertarian Party primary is far more preferable for a candidate such as Amash than running as an independent. It was the only third party to secure ballot access in all 50 states in 2016, and making the ballot in a significant number of states as an independent presidential candidate would be expensive and time-consuming.

“It would cost between \$10 and \$20 million just to get to that starting line, let alone the finish line,” said Sarwark. “If somebody was trying to run for president as an independent right now, they couldn't get all 50 states. There's no feasible way to do that.”

So far, the Libertarian Party has ballot access in 35 states and is pursuing legal action to extend deadlines in several states where they do not yet have the required number of signatures to gain ballot access.

Amash could also help the Libertarian Party continue to build its profile. Gary Johnson, a former New Mexico governor, got 3.3% of the popular vote as the Libertarian nominee in 2016, the party's best-ever performance in a presidential election.

“He's a known quantity to the media. He would be a known quantity to the voters,” Sarwark said of Amash. “That's part of the reason that Johnson and Weld did really well in 2016, is they were both experienced, two-term governors.”

If he became the party's nominee, Amash would be the highest-ranking sitting Libertarian elected official, though it does not necessarily mean that Amash would change his affiliation in

Congress. The party's bylaws require that a presidential candidate be only a "sustaining member of the party," which a person can acquire by donating \$25 in the last year.