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A Pragmatic Champion of Liberty

Gary Johnson's cross-political appeal will help both the country and the liberty movement.

[Shikha Dalmia](#) | May 3, 2011

Independent voters hankering for a genuine alternative to Barack Lyndon Roosevelt Obama on the left and Fox News flunkies on the right might have their man. No, it's not Ron Paul, the Texas Republican Congressman who electrified them last election cycle. It is arguably someone better: the former two-term Republican governor of New Mexico, Gary Johnson.

Johnson, who became the first to declare his candidacy for the Republican nomination, is the most consistently pro-liberty Republican or Democratic candidate in living memory. Like Paul, he is anti-war, anti-big government, and pro-civil liberties. But unlike Paul, he is pro-choice (except for late-term abortions), pro-immigration, pro-trade, and untainted by bizarre conspiracy theories that NAFTA, and a [highway](#) running through Mexico, America, and Canada, is a [prelude](#) to the dissolution of the North American borders. Nor does he have Paul's [racist newsletter](#) baggage. His signature issues are not abolishing the Fed or returning to the gold standard. Rather, it is avoiding the impending financial collapse by cutting government spending on everything by 43 percent—Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and defense—a plan bolder than any that either party has proffered. No political candidate is ever perfect. But Paul has fundamental flaws that Johnson does not. There is no issue on which Johnson is less pro-liberty than any other politician and the vast bulk on which he is significantly more pro-liberty. Paul, however, is far less pro-liberty than even a lot of Republicans on trade and [immigration](#).

Thus unless Johnson misspells “potatoe” or finds some other way to self immolate, his message of common-sense free-market economic conservatism and social liberalism might do the country a world of good, win or lose.

(Article continues below the video "Former NM Gov. Gary Johnson's Vision for a Truly Free America.")

Not that he is accustomed to losing (or misspelling). A fitness fanatic who has participated in five Ironman triathlons, he defied all odds to win the New Mexico governor’s race in 1994 as a 42-year-old political virgin never having run for office. He twice defeated his Democratic opponent by 10 points in a state that is two-to-one Democratic. He funded his first campaign from his own fortune acquired when he sold for \$38 million his construction company, which he started with one person: himself.

But more impressive than winning office is what he did in it. A fiscal hawk, he slashed government spending, something that none of the other governors leading the pack of GOP hopefuls have done. Mitt Romney destroyed his own fiscal legacy by enacting a universal health coverage program that is now devouring the Bay State’s budget. And Sarah Palin, notwithstanding her fairy-tales, presided over a 31 percent spending hike. By contrast, Johnson cut the 10 percent annual growth his state budget had been experiencing in half. He vetoed 750 bills, a third of them Republican, privatized government services and trimmed public-sector employee rosters. He lowered taxes and still exited with a tidy budget surplus.

None of this is to deny that his candidacy faces Mt. Everest-high impediments (a mountain that, incidentally, Johnson has climbed). He has little name recognition and no money. That might

change if he makes a serious showing in the first few primaries. But that'll be difficult given that the GOP's primary process is stacked against anti-establishment candidates like him who refuse to pay obeisance to agricultural subsidies in Iowa, the site of the first contest. His strategy is to win New Hampshire where his pro-liberty message has more resonance.

The issue, however, is whether he can sell this message.

His hope is that his economic conservatism and social liberalism will have cross-political appeal. But the flip side is that it will also generate cross-political hostility. Liberals, whose beloved entitlement programs would face major cuts under him, won't take things lying down. Indeed, they have already started digging up dirt and attacking his opposition to child labor laws. Meanwhile, anti-immigration conservatives too have declared him unfit for office because he supports a guest worker program and opposes deportation.

Ron Paul doesn't have to contend with conservative hostility because he makes no pretense of being a social liberal and routinely flirts with questionable causes popular with his Texas base. But Johnson is no populist. His strategy is to make pragmatic arguments for liberty. Thus he defends his embrace of immigration and opposition to the war on drugs, not on first principles but on fiscal grounds. He doesn't issue lectures on the importance of open borders to individual liberty. Or offer disquisitions on "your life, your choice" to defend drug use. Rather, he appeals to voters' common-sense, first and foremost. As governor, he tackled the illegal immigration issue by demonstrating that illegals pay more in state taxes than they consume in services. Likewise, he emphasizes how the drug war sucks up massive law enforcement dollars without reducing use.

This is a savvy approach because it allows him to be more pro-liberty on more issues and reach more people, especially independents for whom putting America's fiscal house in order is a top priority. According to David Kirby of the Cato Institute, liberty-minded independents are already about 15 percent of voters, big enough to swing a general election. Johnson's message could grow that number.

America is facing an unprecedented economic crisis that will require tough choices. It needs candidates who offer honest and principled solutions that demonstrate that pro-liberty policies are not a moral luxury but a practical necessity. Johnson is the only such candidate. Win or lose, so long as he makes himself heard, he'll push the national conversation in the right direction.

Shikha Dalmia is a senior analyst at Reason Foundation and a columnist for The Daily, America's first iPad newspaper, where this column originally appeared.