



Is Gary Johnson a moderate?

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September 6, 2016

Reason's Walter Olson wonders if the Libertarian Party ticket of Gary Johnson/William Weld is the beginning of a new "Libertarian Centrism" or a "moderate, middle way" that could make a real impact in American politics.

Libertarians should hope so.

Part of being a libertarian — whether left or right-leaning — has always been about being more concerned with first principles than where your beliefs might land you on the ideological spectrum. After all, it is the mainstream right that gets away with calling Mitt Romney a "conservative" and the mainstream left that calls Hillary Clinton a "progressive" when actual conservatives and progressives don't accept either as such. This kind of conventional partisanship has long allowed the major parties to cover up the fact that they aren't so drastically different as both like to pretend.

Libertarians do this too, unfortunately. Many of my right-leaning libertarian friends don't accept Gary Johnson in the same way some of my left-libertarian friends don't consider Rand or even Ron Paul "real" libertarians. They usually cherry-pick a few issues they disagree with (not that they're insignificant issues) to demonstrate why the 50 other things they do agree on somehow don't matter.

It's navel gazing. This is also exactly what the mainstream right and left do, while libertarianism is supposed to be an alternative to mindless political posturing.

So is Johnson actually a moderate? He certainly sells tries to sell himself as such, taking positions that have traditionally been considered firmly left and right and combining them to present something unique. He believes not only that this mixture represents his libertarian philosophy, but that it will be how his party can appeal to the maximum amount of people, at least in theory.

This is nothing new. Ron Paul did this. Rand Paul does this. So do Reps. Justin Amash and Thomas Massie. Libertarian personalities like Judge Andrew Napolitano, John Stossel, Nick Gillespie and Kennedy do it too.

Broad tent. Going “beyond partisan politics.”

Not new.

They don't agree on all the issues (Johnson, Stossel and Gillespie are pro-choice, for example, while both Pauls, Amash, Massie and Napolitano are pro-life). Still, the libertarian brand of each does contain small government red meat for conservatives, combining it with positions on civil liberties, foreign policy and the drug war that might excite progressives. They're all trying to reach across conventional lines and beyond their own circles.

It's simply part of what libertarians do. Does this seemingly inherent transpartisan aspect of the philosophy make libertarians more *moderate*?

It depends, but that word is certainly nothing to be afraid of.

Libertarians like Gary Johnson, or Ron or Rand Paul, can all be portrayed as dangerous extremists or something more moderate depending on how their friends and foes choose to frame them.

If Rand Paul were the Republican nominee at the moment, he would no doubt be touting his positions on foreign policy, civil liberties, the drug war, civil asset forfeiture, criminal justice reform and other issues that might appeal to Democratic voters to steal as many away from Clinton as possible. He would be showing voters that libertarian ideas and policies were nothing to be afraid of.

What would Hillary be doing? Painting Paul as the most extreme Republican imaginable. That's what they're hitting Donald Trump with right now. That's what partisans always do, because it tends to work. The overwhelming majority of general election voters don't want an extremist in the White House.

If Gary Johnson were the Republican nominee, or it looked like he might actually become president as a Libertarian, for all his high profile progressive outreach that irritates conservatives (including me), it would be his conservative record as the governor of New Mexico that Democrats would hammering him with.

Consider this story from the Noam Chomsky-worshipping, far-left site Jacobin on Gary Johnson's hard-right record:

A few issues aside, Johnson's politics are toxic. And it's disingenuous for him to suggest that economics can be set aside as a discrete category. What he downplays as “economics” is actually the core of his political philosophy: his fierce belief that the “free market” knows best, and that most anything the state can do, private business can do better.

So make no mistake: obligatory references to “crony capitalism” notwithstanding, Johnson's faith in capitalist markets is unwavering. He is no friend of the Left, no legitimate vessel for carrying forward any kind of progressive political revolution. He remains, at heart, the teenager who thinks economics can be taught in one lesson, and that freedom means protecting the liberty of the propertied.

I don't know a single conservative — seeing through the ridiculous leftist bias against free market capitalism in this piece — who wouldn't like this candidate description. I also think a dumb-downed and more aggressive version of this would be spewing from the Clinton camp right now if Johnson posed any kind of a threat: Free market extremist Gary Johnson wants to throw poor kids out on the street!

If you come from the Ron Paul presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012, as I do, or are a Libertarian Party regular — or both — you know that these movements have been portrayed as extreme or marginal in some respect by mainstream politicians and pundits. Logically, you would think supporters would be eager to prove that libertarianism isn't extreme and that it would actually be mainstream if only it were explained properly and effectively.

Johnson might not be the best liberty messenger, but he's the only one left in the presidential election. Mainstreaming should be the goal. You should want people you disagree with to come around to your way of thinking. By definition, for new ideas to succeed, positions that were once marginal will have to become mainstream.

My primary job as Ron Paul's 2012 presidential campaign blogger was to show Republican primary voters where my boss's positions lined up with their beliefs and values despite the misconceptions promoted by his enemies.

Gary Johnson's job right now is to tell voters turned off by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump why what he believes is more in sync with them and their concerns. If he can succeed in showing how his ideas are more reasonable than the demagoguery of Clinton and Trump, this is something libertarians should embrace, not be afraid of.