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Third-party supporters hope 2016 election will help change the conversation

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The 2016 election has had, according to polls, the two least-liked candidates in American history rise to the top of the Republican and Democratic tickets. At the same time, the parties' platforms were each pulled further to the right and left by party die-hards — leaving some voters in the cold.

Could 2016 be the year of the third party?

A recent poll by *The Washington Post* and the University of Maryland showed that former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, the Libertarian presidential candidate, is polling at 8 percent support from both Republicans and independents.

Green Party candidate Jill Stein attracted support from about 2 percent of Democratic likely voters and about 3 percent of independent likely voters.

The poll — and a separate survey by Goucher College — showed that support for third-party candidates is stronger among younger voters.

Margaret Flowers, the Green Party candidate for U.S. Senate, said young people are attracted to her message in part because the party refuses money from corporations and political action committees.

“We are not beholden to the interests of the wealthy and the corporations,” Flowers said.

Walter Olson, a Frederick County resident and senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, said he thinks Johnson also appeals to younger voters because of his financial policies. Those include being less likely to enter costly foreign wars and saying he will rein in government spending.

Of the 165,108 registered voters in Frederick County, about 23 percent are unaffiliated or registered to third parties.

The largest third-party registration in Frederick and in Maryland is with the Libertarian party.

As of September, the party had 18,448 registered voters in the state and 1,062 registered voters in Frederick County, according to the Maryland State Board of Elections.

The number of registered Libertarians has been steadily increasing statewide over the last several years. In 2011, there were 9,753 registered Libertarians.

Green Party registration has been more steady over time. Since 2011, the party’s statewide registration has hovered between 8,397 and 8,806 voters.

In September, there were 8,614 registered Green Party voters in the state, with 411 voters in Frederick County.

Both the Green Party and Libertarian Party have candidates up and down November’s ballot.

But that doesn’t mean those candidates are heard, party members lamented. Third-party candidates can be dismissed as spoilers, and face difficulty in gaining access to ballots and debates.

Flowers has protested debates and forums where she wasn’t allowed to appear alongside the two major U.S. Senate candidates: Rep. Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat, and Delegate Kathy Szeliga, a Republican.

Olson said adding third-party voices to political debates could bring a deeper understanding of issues to voters.

“I think there was a great regret — even among people who are not necessarily going to vote for Gary Johnson — that his voice was not on there [in the presidential debates],” Olson said.

“Because it would have been a sharply contrasting voice raising questions that might have been uncomfortable for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.”