



Gary Johnson: “It borders on racist”

The Libertarian Party candidate attacks the GOP's immigration platform -- and says he'd host a show on Current TV

BY ALEX PAREENE | AUGUST 28, 2012

TAMPA — After successfully navigating multiple security checkpoints, including the actual TSA security line inside the Tampa Convention Center, in order to get a free coffee from the Google press lounge, I immediately left the convention center Monday and walked back through the heavily guarded security zone out to desolate, windy, humid downtown Tampa, currently patrolled by helicopters, National Guard, local cops made up to look like national guardsmen, and probably death drones. I was meeting up with Libertarian Party candidate and former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, who was spending a portion of the afternoon holding court at a local coffee shop, across the street from a closed-down record store. I compared it, when I met Johnson, to a country under military occupation. He called it “the future of America.” (He probably meant with the heavily militarized police force, invisible “free speech” zones and death drones and so forth, though it also applies to the closed-down record store.)

Johnson spent Sunday at PaulFest, making an appeal to the supporters of the *other* libertarian candidate from the 2012 primary campaign. Paul’s decision to run again probably cost Johnson — a candidate whose résumé should have made him harder to dismiss — precious media oxygen. Now he’s the official Libertarian Party nominee, and he’s fighting for ballot access and debate invitations. He seemed tired (it’s been a long campaign!) but he was serious, sincere and pissed at his former party. (I’d heard he was sorta intense — he climbs mountains and never touches alcohol or tobacco.)

Here’s some news: Americans Elect accomplished something! Johnson will be, hilariously, the only candidate to run on the ballot line of “Americans Elect,” the weird, well-funded elite centrist “Internet candidate” campaign that launched to much fanfare last year and then totally fizzled out from lack of voter interest, but not before spending millions of dollars to win ballot access in more than two dozen states. “To my knowledge, Americans Elect will have one candidate on the ballot in one state,” Johnson said, “and it’s Oklahoma.”

I'm already on the record as liking Johnson, though I think it's clear he crafts his pitch a little differently depending on his audience. With a pinko like me, he stuck with issues where progressives and libertarians can find common ground. (He did almost slip up at one point while attacking Paul Ryan — I think he was about to accuse him of supporting “liberal” something-or-other — but otherwise we stuck with topics Johnson and the left largely agree on.)

Two subjects made the slightly subdued Johnson especially passionate: Paul Ryan's faux-libertarian credentials, and the death penalty, which he came out against while governor.

On “libertarian” Paul Ryan, and feeling abandoned by the Republican Party:

The pitch is one thing, the reality is 180 degrees different than the pitch. I mean you just go down the list. This guy's supported the wars, this guy's proposed a balanced budget in 28 years, assuming growth. This guy voted for the Patriot Act. This guy voted for the National Defense Authorization Act. This guy proposed legislation in line with Virginia's Ultrasound legislation regarding women. He, well, it's a great perception, but the reality is ... and that's the irony to me is that it's great that they've nominated what is supposed to be the boldest Republican on the budget, and if that's the boldest that the Republicans have then now we're back to the Republicans being relegated to a third party, because of abandoning what is historically supposed to be Republican. And that's me, too. I just feel abandoned. And I feel, I don't feel represented by the Republican Party. I have always had to defend the social side of the Republican Party by saying that it's not the majority, that it's not their focus, when *everything* suggests just the opposite. Anti-gay, anti-drugs ... and now I'm back to Paul Ryan.

Here's our (lightly condensed) conversation:

Do you find you have a lot of support among the Paul people?

I think so. It couldn't have gone any better.

If Ron Paul hadn't run this year do you think that would have affected how you did in the Republican primaries?

I do. I think it would've been — first of all, the fact that he ran, I thought it was going to be harder to marginalize two than one, but I got completely taken out, and I think Ron Paul got marginalized.

They're not letting you in the debates.

Hopefully I still can get in the presidential debates; we're still optimistic that that can happen.

You're on the ballot in every state, right?

Will be. We will be on the ballot in every state. The states that we had the most issue with, we are on. The remaining states, believe me, they're throwing obstacles up in every single state. They're challenging us in Iowa right now, where no third party has ever been challenged before. And we've met the criteria. And that's being heard today. It's ridiculous.

Who's challenging?

Romney.

He's worried about you acting the spoiler for him?

Well, who's to say. But if he isn't worried, why is he challenging us in every single state? Pennsylvania, Michigan, Oklahoma. I am on the ballot in Oklahoma, though, which is the hardest state of all to get access; I am the Americans Elect nominee in Oklahoma. Which is very significant.

Are you on their ballot line anywhere else?

To my knowledge, Americans Elect will have one candidate on the ballot in one state, and it's Oklahoma. They qualified for being on the ballot in 30 states.

They put in all that work on ballot access ...

Work and, to my knowledge, 30 million bucks.

I never quite understood what the endgame was but it was a massive spending and fundraising effort to get ballot access.

So when you talk about third parties, there is only going to be one candidate on the ballot, third party, in all 50 states. To my knowledge, the Green Party will be runner-up in that category in about 30 states. If that. So, big difference.

Has the Libertarian Party traditionally had ballot access that extensive in the past?

This is the 40th anniversary of the Libertarian Party; the Libertarian Party has been on the ballot four presidential cycles. This should be the fifth.

What do you think about the idea that in the long term, the Republican Party has a huge demographic problem?

They have a huge demographic problem. The notion that most people in this country are fiscally responsible and socially accepting, I don't see the Republican

Party matching up with those demographics at all. I see the demographics increasing, and by that I mean the notion of social acceptance is growing, not decreasing; I think the notion of fiscal responsibility is growing, not decreasing. And Republicans seem to be moving further away from those two categories than closer.

It's going to have to force a change, isn't it, if they want to continue winning elections.

Yeah, it is.

It seems like every time you think this is the last time they're going to have to rely on this shrinking coalition, they double down on it. Or, at least, that's my observation.

I have the same observation. And I keep thinking that it's not sustainable. Libertarians would actually supplant Republicans as the second party.

I've known libertarians. One of the things we argue about is that it seemed like they were spending a lot more time doing outreach to the conservative movement than they were to liberals and progressives.

Well, I think that's the perception. I think that's an accurate perception. But I don't think that's the reality. I think that there is as much time spent on both sides, and certainly I'm spending as much time on both sides. Because that's the reality, that's the reality of the issues. The notion of ending the wars, the notion of ending the drug wars, repealing the Patriot Act, marriage equality, wow, these are traditionally Democrat issues that they're not doing so well on.

Yeah, I know. Have you been following the Cato Institute Koch controversy?

Yeah. It's been resolved. I just view the Cato Institute as being incredibly valuable. And it looks as though they'll move forward, and they'll move forward without the Kochs, and it appears as though it's an amiable play.

So. Paul Ryan. They're sort of trying to sell him as a libertarian.

They definitely are. The reality is really 180 degrees. The pitch is one thing, the reality is 180 degrees different than the pitch. I mean, you just go down the list. This guy's supported the wars, this guy's proposed a balanced budget in 28 years, assuming growth. This guy voted for the Patriot Act. This guy voted for the National Defense Authorization Act. This guy proposed legislation in line with Virginia's ultrasound legislation regarding women. He, well, it's a great perception, but the reality is ... and that's the irony to me is that it's great that

they've nominated what is supposed to be the boldest Republican on the budget, and if that's the boldest that the Republicans have then now we're back to the Republicans being relegated to a third party, because of abandoning what is historically supposed to be Republican. And that's me, too. I just feel abandoned. And I don't feel represented by the Republican Party. I have always had to defend the social side of the Republican Party by saying that it's not the majority, that it's not their focus, when *everything* suggests just the opposite. Anti-gay, anti-drugs ... and now I'm back to Paul Ryan.

It's interesting. They recognize that, sort of trying to get some of that "libertarian cool" would be a good thing, they're like, we got a guy ...

That's great. That's great. But shouldn't libertarian cool be represented by the libertarian nominee for president?

So if Al Gore called you up tomorrow and said, we got 6 p.m. open on Current, do you want to host a show?

Yeah. Well, sure.

So, speaking of demographics, I'm not actually sure what the exact language on immigration is in the platform, but –

It's anti-immigration. It borders on racist.

Which is especially insane to me because the GOP spent years trying genuinely hard to reach out to Hispanics. And then they just sort of let the Nativists take over.

I mean, this is something that I witnessed out on the campaign trail for three years, which is that there is a total disconnect between the rhetoric regarding immigration and the reality. And I'm speaking as a border state.

The elites have to recognize that there's a problem there, but do you think they're ...

Pandering. They're pandering to a very small group that is just flaming unfounded fears.

Neither party will suggest this but if border violence is a problem, we could probably take care of that –

[laughs]

– by addressing the revenue source of the cartels.

Everyone is suggesting that border violence be addressed with more guns. As opposed to the root cause, which is prohibition of drugs. Romney in the second debate said, and I quote, "It's a no-brainer that we should build a fence." Well, I don't have a molecule of brain based on that. It's my adamant position that that would be a waste. Of time, of resources, and we really don't have enough of either.

How are you polling in New Mexico?

High of 23, low of 13, based on the polls. I think I'm well regarded in New Mexico, and New Mexico is a state that is 2-to-1 Democrat. They did a poll during the presidential election of the favorability of all the presidential candidates in their home states, and there was only one presidential candidate viewed favorably in his or her own state, and it was me. And the worst was Sarah Palin, which I thought was ... surprising. And second-to-worst is Michele Bachmann, which I also thought was surprising. Everybody else was negative, though. I was actually positive. I was a plus-12, and second place was minus-12.

Everybody else was sort of embarrassing their home states, huh?

Uh-huh.

I'm a Minnesotan, so ...

Uh-huh.

Bachmann has sort of a weird district.

Well, right. Right. Obviously.

So did the Republican Party do anything to try to buy you off to get you to throw your support behind the ticket?

No, no, nothing. Under the bus, figure that was the end.

Do you think you'll be running again in 2016?

It's possible. And that possibility would rest on having momentum on Election Day, and based on my experience to this point that will be the case, I will have momentum going into Election Day. Now whether that momentum equates to 1 percent or 15 percent remains to be seen. Or 37 percent. The only way that I win the election is to be in the national debates. And I'm not saying I win the election being in the national debates, I'm just saying that's the only way I have a chance. To present something way different than is currently being presented. And I think that way, actually lines up with most Americans. Have you seen the website iSideWith.com? Based on that website, I'm the next president of the United States.

[Johnson then comes around the table and has me open my laptop and load iSideWith.com and we look at how many people agree with him compared to Romney and the other third-party candidates.]

When you ask people to align themselves with a candidate based solely on issues and not on other things, the result are often completely at odds with how elections go.

Yeah. And in this case, like I say with Obama, he talks the right game, you go down the list and he says the right thing, but we've seen how four years of not actually pursuing what he talks about turns out.

Thanks so much. You're the first presidential candidate who's ever agreed to sit down with me!

We'll see how it works out with Romney and Obama.

Oh, there was one other thing. When you were in office, you changed your position on the death penalty.

Yes, I did.

I always thought that was interesting. What led to the change of heart?

Just that, naively, I really didn't think that the government made mistakes when it came to the death penalty. Maybe that just sounds incredibly naive, but that's where I was. I came to the realization that unequivocally the government has made mistakes when it comes to the death penalty and it will make mistakes in the future. And I don't want to put one innocent person to death to put 99 that are guilty to death. So philosophically I'm a tooth-for-tooth guy, but the reality is the death penalty as public policy is flawed.

That is one of those responsibilities as governor that I can't even imagine. Being literally responsible for executing people.

There was one person put to death when I was governor of New Mexico. And in my estimation there was no question as to his guilt. He readily confessed, the evidence was overwhelming, he wanted to be put to death. But as a result of that, what I came to find out was, well, now we're going back to when [George] Ryan was governor of Illinois and he ordered a review of everybody on death row, and you can't quote me on the numbers here but two-thirds of those on death row were let off. They were let out of jail, because a review, using DNA, proved that two-thirds of them were innocent. [The actual numbers for Illinois' death row between 1977 and Ryan's moratorium in 2000 were 13 executions and 12

exonerations.] Texas, I have no doubt, has put innocent people to death. I have no doubt. Because of their two-year limit on appeals.

My god, what a perversion of justice.

The perversion is, the reality is, after many years, sometimes 10 years plus on death row, people are let off because they are proven to be categorically innocent. And so I railed on attorney fees keeping that whole system alive. I railed on that. But then when you come to find out that somebody does get off because they're absolutely innocent, what value do you put on attorneys' fees — they're invaluable. There's no amount of money that can compensate for getting a person off of death row. So just lock a person up for the rest of their lives and leave open the possibility that those mistakes won't be made.