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Was 2016 a missed opportunity for libertarians?

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Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party's nominee for president, could not believe what was happening. For months he'd argued that the American public's disgust with the two major parties would cut his path to the White House. He had just watched those candidates disqualify themselves from high office. And he was polling worse than ever — especially in Utah, where those candidates were toxic.

“James Comey would not have done what he did unless there was something underlying all of this,” Johnson told a crowd of around 100 people at a college auditorium near Salt Lake City. “And if Trump is elected, he could actually go into Inauguration Day on trial for rape! Underage rape! He could be on trial for underage rape, taking the oath of office!”

Both claims were full of holes, from Comey's letter to Congress on the case of Hillary Clinton's emails to the flimsiness of the Donald Trump case. At the same time, two time zones away, Johnson's running mate, Bill Weld, was telling MSNBC that he was “vouching for Mrs. Clinton” and far more worried about Trump winning the election.

This was not a bad day in the Libertarian ticket's final run. It was typical.

“We purposely un-coordinate, other than the belief that we believe in each other,” Johnson explained. “Hey, he does not want Donald Trump elected. I don't want to see Hillary Clinton elected. So I don't see an issue with him going after Trump. I'm going after Clinton.”

In 2015 and 2016, for months at a time, the rise of libertarian-minded candidates sparked questions about whether a “libertarian moment” had arrived. Sen. Rand Paul's (R-Ky.) high-profile run for president rattled Democrats who worried about the shifting millennial vote. Johnson, an asterisk in the 2012 campaign, found hundreds of reporters following his 2016 bid. He sought media coverage and inclusion in public polling. He got it.

Paul's campaign ended days after the Iowa caucuses and months after most media stopped covering him. Johnson, who polled as high as the low teens, is tracking to finish in the low single digits and to win no states. The Koch donor network, which seeded libertarian think tanks for decades, has scaled back its 2016 ambitions from an eight-figure ad buy to some rote canvassing in swing states.

In an interview at Salt Lake City's Alfa Club, Johnson acknowledged that “Trump or Clinton will win the election,” unless there was a “collective head-jerk” that got voters in Western states

looking his way again. Before setting out for a final string of rallies from Atlanta to Portland, Ore., to New Mexico, the state he governed, he described 2016 as a building year for the libertarian movement. He would not run for office again.

“I think the Libertarian Party will grow by leaps and bounds,” he said. “It will be a game changer if I can hit 5 percent. Ten million bucks of public financing. No issues regarding ballot access. There are going to be a slew of new libertarians, who are going to be former elected Democrats and Republicans.”

Some of that has happened. Six newspapers endorsed the Johnson-Weld ticket, making six more than had endorsed the party in a presidential election. One retiring member of Congress, Rep. Scott Rigell (R-Va.), bolted Trump for Johnson. In Murray, Johnson was joined by Mark Madsen, a Utah state senator who had quit the Republican Party for the libertarians and told the mostly young crowd to run for office.

“Don’t start with president,” he advised.

But it’s less than libertarians expected, and it comes as both the Democratic and Republican parties sprint further from their views. Bernie Sanders, not Rand Paul, became 2016’s breakout star with young voters; his campaign found millions of them saying they preferred socialism to capitalism. Donald Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party moved it further from the Koch sweet spot on immigration, policing and entitlements. This has been the year of the alt-right more than the year of the libertarian — far more.

“You can complain about the candidates or ‘the system,’ ” said Gene Healy, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute. “The bigger problem is there’s no mass constituency for radical cuts in government — among GOP primary voters or the electorate at large. Any progress toward shrinking government and expanding liberty is going to be slow and incremental, and it’s almost certainly not going to emerge from presidential politics.”

Still, the candidates gave libertarians plenty to complain about. Paul, who is favored to win an easy reelection to the Senate from Kentucky, attempted to balance an America-first foreign policy with the demands of nervous Republican voters. He opposed the nuclear deal with Iran; his father, former Texas congressman Ron Paul, supported it. Libertarian-approved campaign promises such as tearing up the tax code and balancing the budget fell flat, while prickly libertarian purists attacked him as a sellout.

“He sent all these mixed messages about arming the Kurds, and people were like, ‘I don’t know who this guy is,’ ” said Nick Gillespie, the editor of Reason.com and co-author of a 2009 book about how voters bailing on the two parties could become natural libertarians. “He never came back from that. What would have worked better is a full-throated articulation of a libertarian foreign policy.”

The libertarian gripe about Johnson was simpler — he was handed a perfect electoral opportunity and he talked his way out of it. Like Gillespie, Johnson described libertarianism as a goldilocks politics that took what was good about the left and right and junked what was unpopular.

But when the media finally put a camera in front of him, Johnson stumbled. Low-key and self-effacing, with a tendency to describe any policy discussion as “in the weeds,” Johnson’s interviews only broke through if he gaffed — which he did.

Johnson never quite recovered from blanking on a question about what he’d “do about Aleppo.” When Hillary Clinton later erroneously referred to the city as a Syrian border town, Johnson cried bias. He jokingly bit his tongue in an MSNBC interview and blew up at a Guardian reporter who kept informing him that “most economists” opposed his plan to swap the income tax for a national consumption tax.

“I’ve never had an interview like that,” Johnson said in Utah. “Maybe it’s because I was burning the candle at both ends.”

Yet neither Paul nor Johnson made as many gaffes as Trump; neither one, like Clinton, had to fend off regular questions about the federal agents probing her emails. Johnson’s polling swoon happened as he was excluded from the presidential debates, while Democrats and NextGen Climate, lit into him for saying — in 2012 — that climate change was not a problem in the long run because eventually the earth would be engulfed by the sun.

Between Paul, Johnson and the Koch network, libertarianism had plenty of media space to make a sale. That it might end the election with 5 percent support or less challenges the libertarians who have spent decades in the ideological snake pit. They warned before the nomination that Johnson and Weld were poor messengers. (“I appreciate you, I like you, I believe in you, but please keep Bill Weld away from the Libertarian Party,” Fox Business host Lisa Kennedy Montgomery told Johnson this week.) Fred Smith, the founder of the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, suggested that libertarians were still not able to reach the people who might listen.

“The only channels big enough to reach the American people are the media, the academy and pop culture, and none are readily accessible to classical liberals,” Smith said. “Business does have channels to reach the citizenry, which they use to market product, not to gain societal legitimacy. So libertarian ideas got all dressed up for the last decade or so and found they had nowhere to go. One hope is that postelection this strategic weakness in the array of free-market forces will be addressed.”

Utah, which Johnson had once invested with time and hope, was proving Smith’s point. In the summer, Johnson was threatening to force a three-way race between Clinton, Trump and himself. Evan McMullin, the ex-CIA operative and House Republican staffer who jumped into the race days before the filing deadline, drained almost all his support.

McMullin, a Mormon graduate of Brigham Young University, posed a challenge to Trump but none to the Republican Party as it existed five minutes before Trump. He pitched a “new conservative movement” — pro-life, strong on defense, but more pro-immigration.

More worrying for libertarians in the long term is that Johnson’s performance may leave Ron Paul as the most successful candidate in movement history. That was not a problem on economics, or war, or the other defining issues.

But in his 2008 and 2012 campaigns, Paul seemed hamstrung by his support from white nationalists. The stories sprang up at the worst moments: donations from the founder of Stormfront.org, race war fearmongering in his old newsletters. This year, Rand Paul and then Gary Johnson studiously rejected that, replacing it with talk of criminal justice reform. “Black lives matter,” Johnson said at every stop since the summer.

In the end, the nationalist aspect of Ron Paul’s message — the one his son sprinted away from — proved more potent than libertarianism. The same day that Johnson slogged through his Utah schedule, Peter Thiel, the PayPal founder and libertarian donor who had funded a 2012 Ron Paul super PAC, was in Washington making the case for Trump.

“[It’s] become sadly clear, in the year of Trump, that a fair proportion of his 2.1 million voters in 2012 were attracted more toward inchoate system overthrow than well-considered libertarianism,” said Brian Doherty, author of the movement history “Radicals for Capitalism.”

Libertarians, who do not lack for funding, will not give up. Johnson, who was disappointed that the Kochs did not “stand on principle” and back him, nonetheless raised more than any third-party candidate since the 1990s. At the Murray rally, Johnson got a rousing endorsement from Overstock.com founder Patrick Byrne, praising him for bringing “principle” to the race.

Just one-tenth as many people came to the speech as had come to the last big McMullin rally. But those who did skewed young, and had a definition of libertarian that could be bent into any shape by the movement’s next candidate.

“It’s a happy middle between the parties,” said June Paxton, 25. Her only caveat: After she put all of her issue stances into an online survey, she learned that she should have been supporting the Green Party.