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Is Justin Amash a Threat to Biden or to Trump?

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When Representative Justin Amash, a Republican-turned-independent from Michigan, started a presidential exploratory committee on Tuesday, he caused immediate head-exploding from partisans on both sides. Mr. Amash, 40, intends to seek the Libertarian Party nomination.

Forces opposed to Donald Trump on both the left and the right worry he will help the president win re-election by pulling away votes that would otherwise go to Joe Biden.

Undoubtedly, too, some backers of Mr. Trump worry that voters who do not like the president but dislike Democrats more will be tempted to back a third-party candidate and deprive Mr. Trump of votes they see as rightfully his.

The truth will likely prove rather different. Mr. Amash's move should not have surprised anyone (or caused any heads to explode), and it is also far from clear, if history is any guide, that he will hurt Mr. Biden more than Mr. Trump. What libertarians like me hope is that he enables a growing number of Americans to register their dissatisfaction with the major parties and their policy agendas.

Mr. Amash was elected to Congress in 2010 in the Tea Party wave. He has always been more of a libertarian than a conservative or a Republican. It's just that the Republican Party of 2010 was a decent fit for many libertarian-minded Americans; Mr. Trump's version is not.

Sure, we've gotten some deregulation. We got tax cuts. Many of us are pleased with the elevation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court.

But many of us remain outraged by gargantuan spending that kicked off well before the coronavirus crisis, along with routine and increased disrespect by the executive for the rule of law and fundamental constitutional principles like separation of powers and checks and balances.

A lot of us are unhappy with Mr. Trump's trade and immigration policies. The more foreign-policy-focused among us typically perceive him as carrying on with U.S. interventionism as normal.

It was completely predictable, and indeed completely logical, that Mr. Amash would not only leave the party as he did last year but — given his vote for Mr. Trump's impeachment and his obvious, sustained outrage at the administration and the recent direction of the party — that he would look at a third-party challenge as a way of registering his dissatisfaction.

The Libertarian Party's nominee will almost certainly be on the ballot in all 50 states, as was the case in 2016. The party's nominee that year, former Gov. Gary Johnson of New Mexico, took 3.3 percent of the presidential vote, winning 9.3 percent in his home state, 5.2 percent in Colorado and about 4 percent in Arizona, all states that both parties see as in play or want to put in play.

If Mr. Amash is nominated, he will become a headache for both parties — one that many Americans feel they have fully earned. Libertarian-minded Trump opponents worry, however, that this headache will afflict Mr. Biden more than Mr. Trump. As much as Mr. Biden is not to their taste on an array of policy issues, there is a sense that he has fewer authoritarian instincts than Mr. Trump and would represent some acceptable form of “normalcy.”

Typical of the responses from many Trump-dubious libertarians following the Amash announcement was this tweet from Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute: “This is, by a wide margin, the person I'd prefer be president, but ... can we not do this right now?”

Maybe Mr. Amash's percentages will be smaller than Mr. Johnson's in 2016 — Mr. Trump is now a well-known incumbent, for better or worse, but Mr. Biden seems more likable and electorally viable, for now anyway, than Hillary Clinton ever did for many people. The presumption that Mr. Amash will hurt Mr. Biden as much or even more than he will hurt Mr. Trump looks questionable.

I worked to turn out votes for Mr. Johnson in 2016 to protest the major parties; by my rough estimate, 50 percent of Johnson voters would otherwise have voted for Mrs. Clinton, and 50 percent for Mr. Trump — if they were willing to vote for either at all. There are arguments that third-party candidates hurt Mrs. Clinton, but there are also arguments that Mr. Johnson, at least, helped her, if very slightly.

In 1992, Ross Perot was not on the ballot as a Libertarian, but he is known as one of the most famous spoilers in recent political history, so his effects on the 1992 race remains worth a look.

As The Times reported, “If Mr. Perot had not been on the ballot, 38 percent of his voters said, they would have voted for Gov. Bill Clinton, and 38 percent said they would have voted” for George H.W. Bush. In pure Electoral College terms, though, Mr. Perot arguably helped Mr. Clinton a little — in 28 states where Mr. Perot won 20 percent or more of the votes, 17 went for Mr. Clinton and 11 went for Mr. Bush.

To the extent that anyone needs to be worrying about Mr. Amash costing someone an election, it's probably more the Trump team than Democrats.

Mr. Amash's presidential toe-dipping should most disturb people desperate for more members like him in Congress. For us, the loss of a single libertarian-minded congressman is a real blow.

In Michigan, Mr. Amash will be on the ballot for re-election to his House seat, but he is not actively campaigning (and observers believe that a Republican candidate is favored to win the district in the fall).

There is one demographic that could complicate the picture in the state, which was famously determined in 2016 by nearly 11,000 votes: a large Arab-American population. Could Mr. Amash, the son of a Palestinian refugee father and a Syrian immigrant mother, pull enough Arab-American voters from Mr. Biden to tilt the state to Mr. Trump? It's doubtful. At the moment in Michigan, Mr. Biden holds a solid polling advantage over Mr. Trump. Arab-Americans were in 2016 and are likely this year to remain quite anti-Trump. In fact, some conservative Arab-American Republicans in the state could flip from Mr. Trump to Mr. Amash.

In 2020, libertarians will lose one of our most powerful voices in Congress. But maybe, just maybe, if the stars align, we'll be able to cast a principled vote and send a message to the major parties.