

The other swing voters: Some undecided voters occupy the political fringes, not the middle

By Chris Moody – November 5th, 2012

Pundits, campaign operatives and party strategists agree that the 2012 presidential election, like almost every election before it, is a race for the undecided voter--and they're mostly right. But these perpetually fascinating specimens aren't merely torn between President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

With Election Day hours away, there exists another universe of toss-up voters, one rarely mentioned: The Fringe Undecideds, who are torn between voting for a major-party nominee and a third-party candidate.

There are Fringe Undecideds on the left--and they may have cost Al Gore the presidency in 2000 when many of them voted for Ralph Nader. But in 2012, the Green Party's Jill Stein doesn't seem to be giving Obama much anxiety.

Instead, it is on the right--to use the term loosely--where the Fringe Undecideds may be kingmakers, if the race is close enough. These are libertarian voters who find themselves unexcited about Romney but horrified of the possibility of a second term for Obama. Their man this year is Gary Johnson, a two-term Republican governor of New Mexico who left the GOP and became the presidential nominee of the Libertarian Party.

Early polling data suggests the Libertarian Party nominee could take votes away from both major-party candidates. Liberals who are opposed to Obama's mass deportations, his drone war in Yemen and Pakistan or his crackdown on medical-marijuana dispensaries could find themselves drawn to Johnson's candidacy. But the best evidence that Johnson is likely to hurt Romney more than Obama is that Republicans worked hard to keep Johnson's name off state ballots.

In Michigan, to name one example, Johnson was barred from the ballot because his paperwork was filed three minutes after the deadline. On Election Day, 46 states and the District of Columbia will list the Libertarian candidate on the ballot.

Although Romney has done little to reach these undecideds--some would argue he has pushed them away--there has been a grassroots effort to bring them into the fold. An online search for "Why libertarians should support Mitt Romney" yields hundreds of essays published in conservative publications and blogs that implore their unreliable brethren to support their candidate.

Still, an unscientific Reason Magazine survey of some of the most prominent libertarian writers found that none planned to support Obama or Romney. All either pledged support to Johnson or said they would not vote at all. (One writer was still undecided between Johnson or Romney, but leaned toward Johnson.)

"It's better to vote for what you want and not get it than to vote for what you don't want and get it," wrote David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, in his response to the survey.

Therein lies the heart of the debate. The counterargument from some conservatives: Even if Romney isn't the ideal candidate for libertarians, Obama would be worse. That's the argument Paul Ryan, Romney's running mate, made at a September campaign stop in Lima, Ohio, when asked pointedly why someone who might support a candidate like libertarian-leaning Republican Rep. Ron Paul should get behind the Romney-Ryan ticket. (Ryan's initial response--"Do you want Barack Obama to be re-elected? Then don't vote for Ron Paul"--left something to be desired, but he later followed up with a more thorough argument.)

Beyond scare tactics, Romney's campaign seems to have done little to sway the hearts and minds of the Fringe Undecideds. The campaign has used Paul's son Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul as a surrogate, but sparingly. (Perhaps for good reason: The last time Rand Paul campaigned for Romney, he criticized his foreign policy.)

"I think they really went about it the wrong way," said Christopher Barron, a libertarian-leaning Republican and the co-founder of GOProud, an organization that represents gay conservatives. Barron did not support Romney during the Republican primaries. He chose Johnson instead, but recently made a public turnaround. Now he has joined the

chorus of Republicans who are calling on libertarians to join him in abandoning Johnson in the ballot booth.

For years, Barron said, he scoffed at undecided voters. He found them baffling. Until he became one himself.

"I've never been an undecided voter. It was a phenomenon that I found hard to comprehend," Barron said. "Half of the election, I thought, Who are these yahoos switching between candidates in the last months of the race? How can you be undecided between two candidates? Yet somehow, that's where I found myself.

"At the end of the day, I can't in good conscience do anything that might help elect Barack Obama to another four years," he added. "Either Mitt Romney or Barack Obama is going to be president and I for myself had to decide, Do I want to be part of electing the next president?"