



Is Libertarian Gary Johnson a Good Alternative to Trump or Clinton?

Former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson won the 2016 Libertarian Party nomination for president on Sunday, as expected, winning on the second ballot with 55 percent of the vote. A former two-term Republican governor of New Mexico, he sought the Republican nomination for president in 2012, before deciding by the end of 2011 to seek the Libertarian Party nomination instead.



Ordinarily, the Libertarian Party and its candidates attract little attention in a presidential race. Johnson got the Libertarian Party nomination in 2012 and went on to garner a little over a million votes, falling just short of one percent of the total popular vote. That was the most votes (but not the highest percentage) ever received by a Libertarian candidate for president.

But Gary Johnson might do much better this time around. The expected nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, are going to have to contend with the highest unfavorable ratings in polling history. In other words, if the polls are accurate, many more Americans than in the past can be expected to either vote against rather than for a candidate, or to stay home.

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This gives Johnson and the Libertarians an opportunity like they have never before experienced. In a recent Fox News poll, 10 percent expressed a voting preference for Johnson over Trump or Clinton, in a three-way race. Shortly after Labor Day, the Commission on Presidential Debates will select which candidates qualify to participate in the important presidential debates. The criteria used by the Commission includes being constitutionally eligible, on the ballot in most states (Johnson will be on the ballot in all 50 states), and be polling at 15 percent.

“The frontrunners of both parties are absolutely hated by giant segments of the electorate. We are a serious alternative,” argued Nicholas Sarwark, the national chairman of the Libertarian National Committee. Ben Sasse, a conservative Republican senator from Nebraska, who has gained national attention because he is refusing to support Trump, argued, “There are dumpster fires in my town more popular than these two.”

So how many votes might Johnson (or another third-party candidate for that matter) be able to garner from those who normally vote either Republican or Democrat but are now dead set against voting for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?

Johnson served as governor of New Mexico from 1995-2003, as a Republican. He has always expressed a philosophy of limited government, and describes himself as fiscally conservative and pro-civil liberties. His non-interventionist foreign policy views are not likely to win him any support from the *neo-conservatives* in the Republican Party who are upset at the nomination of Trump. But those same views will be appealing to many of the *paleo-conservatives* who were strongly opposed to the repeated interventions of the Bush Administration and who have in the past favored candidates such as Pat



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Buchanan and Ron Paul. It could also resonate with the anti-war Left.

For the most part, Johnson could be expected to oppose the expansion of the role of the federal government in the economy. One might expect him to actually favor the dismantlement of government programs that have no constitutional basis. But his comments that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is an example of good government bring that into question and are very troublesome to constitutionalists. After all, where in the U.S. Constitution can one find a legal basis for the creation of the EPA?

Johnson accepts the thesis that human activity impacts the climate, but he opposes mandatory cap-and-trade policies, even favoring the building of more coal-fired power plants. He also supports nuclear energy.

Generally speaking, Johnson's positions on federal spending and the taxes to pay for that spending should appeal to limited-government conservatives. He wants to eliminate personal and corporate taxes.

"No tariffs, no restrictions," Johnson told John Stossel, when asked about trade deals, but he had reservations. "So much of the legislation that we pass isn't really free market at all." He added that most free trade agreements were products of corporatism. "We're moving toward a global economy whether we like it or not," Johnson said in an interview while he was governor of New Mexico.

However, he dismissed concerns that trade deals such as NAFTA had cost American jobs, arguing, "the [lost] jobs we're talking about are those we generally don't want." Nor does he address the most serious concern about multilateral trade agreements, which is that they create multinational governmental structures, which necessarily reduce the national sovereignty of the United States, and the liberty of its citizens.

Unlike Ron Paul, Johnson does not favor abolition of the Federal Reserve System. He does favor restricting its role to maintaining price stability, which is still government manipulation of the economy, resulting in economic dislocations.

Johnson favors reducing or eliminating federal involvement in education, and he is opposed to auto or banking bailouts.

But although many of Johnson's positions will appeal to conservatives, he will have great (if not insurmountable) difficulty winning the support of conservative voters in the area popularly known as "social issues," particularly abortion. In this regard, Johnson's views differ only slightly from the typical liberal Democrat. In fact, Johnson himself says the politician he most aligns with, of the current political field, is Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

Johnson supports "a woman's right to choose up until the point of viability," although he does favor banning late-term abortions and mandating parental notification for minor girls seeking to obtain an abortion. He thinks *Roe v. Wade* was wrongly decided, because it "extended the reach of the Federal government into areas of society never envisioned in the Constitution." Thus, while he is pro-choice himself, he would leave laws regarding abortion to "individual states."

On the other hand, Johnson does not take the states' rights position when it comes to same-sex "marriage." He favors a federal law legalizing same-sex "marriage" across the United States. He even signed onto an amicus curiae brief before the Supreme Court in support of same-sex marriage.

Johnson also appears to buy into many liberal social movements, including the push to allow



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transgender individuals to use the restrooms and showers of those of the opposite biological sex. In a recent interview, Johnson saw no problem in men and women using the same showers, saying “it flies in Europe.”

While the Republican primary electorate expressed clear opposition to illegal immigration by voting for anti-illegal-immigration candidates Ted Cruz and Donald Trump in particular, as opposed to voting instead for former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Senator Marco Rubio (a co-author of the so-called Gang of Eight bill to liberalize immigration), Johnson favors a path to citizenship for illegal aliens. He would also make it easier for would-be legal immigrants to apply for work visas.

Certainly Johnson could be expected to work to end the federal “war on drugs.” He only recently resigned as CEO of Cannabis Sativa, a marijuana marketing firm. While he has made no secret of his personal use of pot, he discourages the use of harder drugs, although he does not favor government restrictions on their use.

Johnson’s views on the subject on Christianity and on religion in general could be best described as secular. In fact, Johnson received the “best” grade during the 2012 presidential election campaign from the Secular Coalition of America. In an interview with Google + Hangout in 2011, Johnson called for “separation of church and state,” adding, “I think that [religion] should not play a role in any of this [government].”

Johnson does not seem to be a strong defender of religious liberty, although as a Libertarian, he should be expected to defend all sorts of liberty. “These religious freedom laws are really just a way to discriminate against gay individuals, the LGBT community. That’s what they are about. I don’t think that the Libertarian Party should be engaged in any way in endorsing discrimination.”

This issue was a point of contention between Johnson, and another Libertarian hopeful, Austin Petersen (who finished second to Johnson in the balloting). During a recent debate, Petersen offered the analogy that a Jewish baker should not be forced to bake a Nazi cake. Johnson took the position that the government should compel bakers to bake wedding cakes for same-sex couples, and dodged a question as to whether priests should be forced to participate in same-sex weddings. Hardly a liberty position.

Petersen said it is not the role of government to “make us into better people,” however one defines that. Johnson, on the other hand, argued that failure to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding reception was discrimination, and such refusal should be disallowed.

Just exactly how far would Johnson carry this? Should a professional writer be compelled to write a pro-Nazi book even if he is Jewish, just because some potential customer asked him to do so? Should a Muslim lawyer be forced to take a case against the construction of a mosque just because some potential client asked him to represent him?

Johnson is a graduate of the University of New Mexico, is divorced, and has two children.

Photo of Gary Johnson: Gage Skidmore

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