

The Role of Gary Johnson in this Election

by Vic Berez

Obama-Romney. Romney-Obama. What happens if you don't like the choice? You have only three options: a) stay home and don't vote; b) vote for "the lesser of two evils" and c) make a "protest vote" for a third-party candidate. If you stay at home, nobody knows how you might have voted. If you choose the "lesser" path, since you can't mark your vote with an asterisk, nobody will be able to distinguish you from the "true believer." But, excluding a few die-hards, third-party votes are almost always "protest" votes. Maybe that is the way to have your feelings about the election counted. My guess is that about two million Americans will choose the third-party path in 2012 and almost all those votes will be on the *Libertarian Party* line.

Third-party candidates don't usually have much clout. Occasionally one comes along who is already well-known, and though he can't win, he can garner a significant percentage of the popular vote and thereby make a difference in the overall results. Obvious examples are Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 and Ross Perot in 1992. But, that sort of third-party candidate doesn't exist this year.

Then there are the minor parties that are issue-based, rather than personality-based ... for example the *Know-Nothing Party* (anti-immigration in the 1850s) and the *Prohibitionist Party* (anti-alcohol at the turn of the last century) and the *Libertarian Party* of today. Gary Johnson is the Libertarian candidate you will find on the Presidential ballot along with Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Gary who? ... you say. Gary Johnson is the two-term former Governor of New Mexico. [He won that office on the Republican ticket in this traditionally "blue" state.] The homepage of his campaign website uses these words to describe him.



"Gary Johnson has been an outspoken advocate for efficient government, balanced budgets, rational drug policy reform, protection of civil liberties, comprehensive tax reform, and personal freedom. As Governor of New Mexico, Johnson was known for his common sense business approach to governing. He eliminated New Mexico's budget deficit, cut the rate of growth in state government in half, and privatized half of the state prisons."

Does Gary Johnson have a chance to win the presidential election of 2012? NO! ... that's a very emphatic "no." But, could he make a difference?

Maybe ... and that's a real maybe! Let's talk about why that's the case.

First, in fairness, we must examine Johnson's positions on the major issues of the day. I'll try to present them impartially, primarily based on information in his campaign website.

- Foreign Policy: bring the troops home and lead by example.
- Immigration: simplify and encourage immigration primarily through work visas, while tackling the varying problems of illegal immigration.
- Gun Rights: he's a strong 2nd Amendment advocate who is unwilling to "negotiate away our freedoms in the name of safety."
- Internet and Technology: keep the Internet censor-free, affordable, and untaxed.
- Civil Liberties: end the assault on privacy by repealing the *Patriot Act* and getting the TSA under control; "government must be neutral on personal beliefs."

- The Economy and Taxes: reduce spending, replace the current tax system with the *Fair Tax*, and reduce Federal involvement in the economy.
- Education and School Choice: give education back to the parents and teachers, and shut-down the *Department of Education*.
- Drug Policy Reform: legalize marijuana, take measures to reduce the harm of “hard drugs”, and accept the fact that there will never be a drug-free America.
- Spending and the Deficit: balance the budget, enact responsible entitlement reform, and audit the *Federal Reserve*.

Wow ... that’s an amazing list. In typical Libertarian fashion, it exhibits conservatism on economic issues, liberalism on social issues, and stridency everywhere. As can be expected, almost everyone will agree with some of his policies and disagree with others. And, I’m sure, even Gary Johnson himself recognizes that this can’t all be implemented overnight ... it would take a long, gradual process to get there. Considering the rather pronounced streak of libertarianism in me, for some of us a 2012 vote for Gary Johnson could be more than a protest vote rejecting of the “two evils.”

Since winning the election is not a foreseeable result for Libertarians, a key question is how can Gary Johnson get his message out ... because that’s the only realistic goal of this kind of third-party movement. The way our system works, that takes money ... and lots of it, mostly for paid TV advertising. That money just isn’t available to any candidate without the support of a major party, public financing, or that whole bunch of Super-PACs. There are free or low-cost approaches ... the Internet is one, check out www.GaryJohnson2012.com ... but for broad exposure at low-cost you need to be part of the televised presidential debates.

Almost certainly those debates will have only two participants ... candidates who poll less than 15% are normally excluded. That makes sense for the myriad of ego-trip “candidates” who foul the ballots here-and-there across the country while gathering only a few hundred votes. But, I don’t believe it makes sense for a bona fide nationwide party on the ballot in every state that’s likely to poll in the millions. Remember the Republican primary debates? The lesser candidates were given lesser opportunities to speak ... but, still had a chance to reach the public with their basic message. I wish such an approach could be taken with Gary Johnson. His no-nonsense way of dealing with issues might even tone-down the divisive rhetoric we’ll hear from Romney and Obama and force them to focus on the real concerns of the American people. Unfortunately, there’s not much hope of that happening.

So that’s the story. Gary Johnson will be on the ballot in all 50 states. He likely will not be allowed to participate in the presidential debates. He’ll probably win a significant percentage of the popular vote (10-20%) in only his home-state of New Mexico. But I suspect he will get close to 2% of the vote nationwide, with 3-4% in a handful of states. If those states are among the so-called “swing” states ... Colorado, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina ... Gary Johnson and his *Libertarian Party* could swing the entire election. Hey, that’s not so far-fetched. You’ve probably never heard of James Birney of the *Liberty Party* whose few votes swung New York and the election of 1844 to the Democrats, or of James Baird Weaver of the *Greenback Labor Party* who garnered 306,000 votes in 1880 when the major party candidates popular count differed by less than 2000 votes! It could happen again in a close election.