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Libertarians see Democrat, GOP woes as chance to shine

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Loyal Libertarians across the nation hope this could be the year for a speck of gold on an electoral college map that for almost the past five decades has been red for Republicans and blue for Democrats.

"To break the stranglehold of the two-party system, it's going to take a situation where we couldn't possibly predict, where all of a sudden people are going to be extraordinarily unhappy and want to jump ship," said Caryn Ann Harlos, communications director for the Colorado Libertarian Party.

"It's a long time to November. The stars could align even more. Am I a dreamer? I think you've got to be a little bit of an ideological dreamer to be in a third party."

The stars aligning for Harlos, and others, include the nomination of New Mexico's former Republican Gov. Gary Johnson for president and former Massachusetts Gov. Bill Weld for vice president at a time when the Republican and Democratic nominees are struggling with their own demons.

A video on the Johnson Weld campaign website cleverly bills the duo: "A credible alternative to Clintrump."

"We've been working on this party for 45 years this December, building it up," said Libertarian Party Chairman Nicholas Sarwark. "We've done the work over the decades to attract candidates of the stature of Gov. Johnson and Gov. Weld. We could have a breakout this year ... with the collaboration of the two old parties who have nominated the two most hated figures in American politics, ever."

So what could winning a state in November look like for Johnson and Weld?

A long shot for sure.

But possibly like Colorado.

The Libertarian Party was founded in the home of Colorado Springs anti-tax advocate Luke Zell, a City Council gadfly who ran around with Douglas Bruce (notably never a member of the party) and the acknowledged founder of the party David Nolan. Nolan and Zell have died as have many

of the advocates who launched the party in 1971 in Colorado Springs and held the first convention in Denver.

But for Colorado, the tradition has lived on as have the popularity of the philosophies espoused by those founding members.

Today there are just over 27,000 active registered members of the Libertarian Party in Colorado, according to July 1 statistics from the secretary of state, which frequently puts it in the top 10 most active states for the party, Harlos said.

But the potential for Johnson and Weld in Colorado goes beyond party's history here and registration numbers.

"The culture of the state of Colorado embodies the overarching principle of the party," Sarwark said, who for a time was a public defender in Arapahoe County before moving to Arizona and becoming chair of the party. "You have the right to pursue happiness in any way you chose as long as you don't hurt anyone or take anyone's stuff."

He said Colorado tends to be liberal on social issues but conservative on other issues like fiscal concerns or gun rights.

And Colorado has the kind of voter split that could spell victory, requiring only a plurality to win the state if Hillary Clinton takes her share of Colorado's 980,000 registered Democrats, Donald Trump gets the 890,000 registered Republicans who vote and Johnson taps into the 1 million unaffiliated voters.

Richard Winger, a longtime Libertarian who runs the website Ballot Access News, said Johnson is likely to do well in his home state of New Mexico, but also in Utah where he said the huge Republican voting bloc overlaps with members of the Mormon faith who "dislike Trump."

Johnson was polling at 10 percent in a recent poll conducted of Utah voters by UtahPolicy.com and Dan Jones and Associates, while an earlier poll by the Salt Lake Tribute had him at 13 percent.

That's a better showing than in Colorado where the June CBS News YouGov online poll had Johnson at 4 percent.

But Winger said more than trying to win a state, Johnson needs to take 5 percent of the popular vote, a threshold not reached by a third-party candidate since Ross Perot ran on the Reform ticket in 1996.

"It could be historic if he gets 5 percent," Winger said. "That would mean the party could get public funding from the Federal Election Commission."

Winger estimates that share would hypothetically be around \$16 million if Johnson wins 7 percent of the vote.

"Which is a lot of money," Winger said.

The last candidate to accept public funding - and the spending limits that accepting the money entails - was Sen. John McCain in 2008. Records from the Federal Election Commission show the GOP nominee took \$84 million that year.

It's hard to get to 5 percent of the popular vote, however, without getting on the ballot in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The difficulty of getting on the ballot cannot be understated, Winger said. The Libertarian Party seems likely to pull it off this year, he said, but not without some difficulty. Some states have huge thresholds, noting the toughest require a vote threshold in a previous statewide election of 2 percent or close to 90,000 signatures.

Sarwark estimated it will cost the party about \$500,000 to get Johnson on the ballot across the nation, and that's possible in large part due to the groundwork of the party over many years.

"It could cost \$5 million to \$10 million if you do it from a standing start," Sarwark said, noting that there are also early deadlines in some states that a candidate is likely to miss.

The American Constitution Party (known nationally as the Constitution Party) which has 7,710 registered voters in Colorado, is likely to nominate Darrell Castle for the presidency. He's on the ballot in 18 states, including Colorado, according to the party website.

The Green Party, which is expected to nominate Jill Stein as its presidential candidate in August, has 7,441 registered voters in Colorado. Stein, a doctor and longtime environmental advocate, is on the ballot in 23 states including Colorado, according to the party website.

There's another critical threshold for Johnson though and that's hitting 15 percent in major national polls to get invited to the presidential debates.

Of three polls this July that included Johnson, one funded by The Economist had him at 4 percent, a Reuters poll had him at 6 percent and a Rasmussen Reports poll had him at 9 percent.

"In terms of name recognition, we're pretty far behind," Sarwark said. "It's a matter of stabilizing north of 15 percent to then get into the national televised debates. Once that happens, it's a matter of kind of coalescing all the people who are really unhappy with their choices. I saw a poll that had Donald Trump's negatives at 70 percent, which I didn't even know was possible."

But aside from name recognition, Johnson has a policy problem or two.

The Libertarian Party platform begins: "we seek a world in which all individuals are sovereign over their own lives and no one is forced to sacrifice his or her values for the benefit of others."

That means closely held beliefs of either party can get crosswise with Johnson who believes in a woman's right to chose, ending the war on drugs (namely supporting the legalization of marijuana but not other narcotics) and is a staunch advocate for smaller government.

"I want government out of our pocketbooks," he said at the Libertarian Party's convention. "Taxation is theft."

In his moment to shine, an hourlong town hall broadcast on CNN, some critics said Johnson fell short of winning over voters.

"The two-party system is a two-party dinosaur and ... they're about to come in contact with the comet here," Johnson said on CNN.

"I think that is a real possibility. Look there are extremes on both sides. And I think most Americans are Libertarian. It's just that they don't know it, and this is an opportunity tonight to describe that."



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