

# How "Terrible" Trump and Clinton Help the Libertarian Party in Colorado and Beyond

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By [Michael Roberts](#)



Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson during a 2012 appearance in Denver.

Additional photos below.

Photo by Sam Levin

The [Libertarian Party was founded in Colorado](#) in 1971 — and 45 years later, party leaders here believe their cause is poised to make its largest impact to date.

Why? Libertarian Party of Colorado chair Jay North and LPCO communications director Caryn Ann Harlos feel one big reason is the way the Libertarian philosophy, which focuses on personal responsibility and the tyranny of government interference in citizens' lives, resonates with today's voters.

But North also thinks the party will benefit from the rising profile of Libertarian presidential candidate and former New Mexico Governor [Gary Johnson](#), who made a [big push for presidential votes in Colorado back in 2012](#) — not to mention what North sees as the fact that Republican standard-bearer Donald Trump and his Democratic Party counterpart, Hillary Clinton, are "terrible."

Expect that point to be reinforced at a [Gary Johnson sign-waving rally](#) taking place on the Highland Bridge over Interstate 25 starting at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 27. It's the sort of

people-powered political event that differentiates the Libertarian Party of Colorado from the so-called major parties.

Below, check out a wide-ranging conversation with North and Harlos, touching on the history of the party in Colorado and beyond, its goals (which go beyond merely winning elections), its most significant accomplishments by way of intellectual influence (including legalization of gay marriage and limited medical and recreational marijuana sales), local Colorado Libertarians running for office (among them Lily Tang Williams and Kim Tavendale), a Libertarian benefactor whose identity remains a secret even to them, and the potential impact of Johnson and running mate Bill Weld collecting more than 5 percent of the popular vote in balloting this November.



Caryn Ann Harlos.  
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***Westword:** Caryn, could you tell us a little about the history of the Libertarian Party in Colorado. Is it accurate to call Colorado the birthplace of the party?*

**Caryn Ann Harlos:** It is. You had a group of disaffected Republicans, some Democrats and some others who had gotten together during the Nixon administration. They had met in David Nolan's house in Westminster and decided it would be a wonderful idea to start an alternative political party. It was formally founded in Colorado Springs in December of 1971.

*How quickly did the party make a mark nationally?*

**CAH:** Our first ticket in 1972 was John Hospers as the presidential candidate and Toni Nathan as the vice presidential candidate. He was the first openly gay person to run for president, and Toni was the first female to receive an electoral college vote. We had a faithless elector out of Virginia that didn't go with what he was supposed to vote in the electoral college and cast his vote for the Libertarian ticket.

*So the message spread quite quickly across the country?*

**CAH:** It did. We had our first convention in 1972, and all of the states were represented at that convention. It did get a lot of interest in the beginning. But you've got to understand that prior to the formation of the LP, there were a lot of groups that were already doing similar things. They just weren't official political parties. Groups similar to the Young Americans for Liberty today that were already very active — and some of them gravitated toward the LP.

*What are some of the key moments from then to now that marked the growth of the Libertarian Party, both nationally and in Colorado?*

**CAH:** In my opinion, that's not really the right question we should ask. Third parties are in an uphill battle in our system. It's weighted toward having a two-party system. So when you form a third party, you have to decide precisely what the goals are. David Nolan, one of the main founders of the party, put out a paper that stated the reasons for starting the Libertarian Party, and his reasons included putting out positions that would then force the two major parties to adopt our positions, and to educate the public. The purpose of the Libertarian Party was not necessarily to win elections. People today don't like to hear that and I'm somewhat of a heretic in the party for saying this. But David Nolan made a list of things he thought we could accomplish, and at the end of that list, he said, "Oh, we might win some elections along the way." Now, more than forty years later, I think the focus has understandably shifted, because we're a mature party and the chances of winning are much different than they were in 1971 or 1972. But the Libertarian Party is a vanguard party, which means moving policy in our direction — and if the two major parties start adopting our positions, that's just as successful.

So I would say things that have marked the success of the Libertarian Party include the legalization of gay marriage — although our ultimate position is that the government shouldn't be involved in marriage at all. But if it is going to be involved, it's got to treat people equally. That might not have been a victory per se; it was a lateral move. But it certainly was a lateral move in favor of the government not discriminating against people because of their own moral qualms. And the success of pot legalization is another example. Those are positions the Libertarian Party has held since 1971. It wasn't fashionable in decent company to be in favor of either of those things. So I would count those as some of our major successes. And then, obviously, you've got the ticket this year, with the perfect storm. And Ron Paul ran as a Libertarian. So there certainly have been highlights. But a lot of people want to hear, "We

elected so-and-so in this year." I think that betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of how third parties have operated up until now. But this year could be a game-changer.

*This year, Jay, how would you characterize the goals of the party?*



Jay North.

[LPColorado.org](http://LPColorado.org)

**Jay North:** I mainly focus on Colorado, and from a Colorado perspective, I tell people that Gary Johnson and Bill Weld turn heads. We may not get people to vote; we have no control over that. But do our candidates turn heads? They do. The Libertarian Party of Colorado's responsibility is to educate — to teach people what are the true principles of Libertarianism and why do we hold to those principles. And I think that gets people to actually join the party. So Gary Johnson, he may get some people to join the party. But he really turns heads. And getting those heads turned, so people are asking, "What is a Libertarian?" That's where the state party steps in and takes it from there.

*Tell me a little about folks running for office here in Colorado under the Libertarian banner.*

**JN:** Our biggest one, who's really getting out there and getting people to pay attention to her, is Lily Tang Williams. She's running for senate against Darryl Glenn and Michael Bennet. She's going around and getting conservative groups to back her. In Colorado Springs, a conservative group [the El Paso County Republican Strategy Forum] said, "We're backing Lily Tang Williams. We're not backing Darryl Glenn." She's got Tea Party groups that are saying, "We're backing Lily Tang Williams." So she's really pulling in a lot of people. In other years, you might not see that. But this year, between Gary Johnson and her, it's a pretty nice year for her. Another one is Kim Tavendale, who's up in Broomfield County. She's running for House District 33, and she's doing quite a bit of work up there as well. She's had lots of people showing up at her events, and she sits down and talks with them. She lets them ask her any question they want to ask, and she'll answer them. She's doing pretty well up there as well.

*Caryn mentioned the phrase "perfect storm" earlier. Why is it that this year, the party is getting arguably more attention than ever before, particularly on a national level?*

**JN:** You have two really terrible candidates running for office. And that's not just me saying that. That's the polls asking, "Do you trust this person? Would you vote for this person?" And people are not willing to say they'd vote for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. With the polls the way they are now, they kind of have to say they'd vote for one of them. But when you throw other people into the mix, their numbers drop really fast. Plus, if you just look at either one of them, some of the statements they make, you have to sit back and say, "Why in the world are you saying that?" You wouldn't have been able to get away with saying some of those things ten years ago. People would have hung you for it. But they're saying them now, and people seem to be saying, "Mmmmm. Okay." So between those two being terrible candidates, people are looking for other options. We have both Democrats and Republicans calling us, coming to our meetings, and they're saying, "I'm here to support Gary Johnson. Tell me what you want me to do." People are donating thousands of dollars in Colorado, which we normally don't get — thousand-dollar donations at one time to the party to help support Gary Johnson's campaign.



Lily Tang Williams.  
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**CAH:** I would add that it's not just that we have the two most disliked candidates — I'd like to be hyperbolic and say "in world history," but I'll bet you in Rome there were a few worse ones....

But the world situation in general — the same things that lead to the popularity of Trump, where he's playing on fear, that sense of uneasiness — is making people much more open to hearing an alternative point of view. We've got people saying, "I've never heard of these Libertarians before. Let's look at their ideas." And the ideas seem to really back to a lot of the ideas this country was founded upon. I think people are hungry to hear that. And it's not just that these two candidates are so unlikable. Gary Johnson comes across as just an honest person who says what he truly believes. He doesn't lie. He might be wrong on some things, but if he's wrong, he's sincerely wrong from his heart. So I think he's touching people with his very open sincerity, which third parties have the luxury of doing. I think the two main parties have kind of gotten corrupt and they don't do that anymore.

*What are some of the main tenets of the Libertarian Party that might help people understand what it's all about?*

**JN:** It comes down to two base principles, and everything else is built on top of them. The first is "Do no harm." And the second one is "Don't take their stuff." Everything else comes from those two principles. We're for self-defense and we're for freedom of speech, freedom of religion. You can list off a lot of different issues, but they all come from those two core principles.

**CAH:** To build on what Jay is saying, the pithy saying from the national party is that our beliefs can be boiled down to "Don't hurt people" and "Don't take their stuff." But that's the simplistic way to put it. The more complicated way to put it is that we don't believe in ever initiating force against other people, against their rights, even if they're doing things we don't personally agree with. That is how, for instance, we have a position that we believe in full drug legalization, and not just for marijuana — because we believe people own their own bodies, and you have a right to do with your body what you wish as long as your'e not infringing upon someone else's inherent rights. If you want to go out and destroy your life with drugs, we may encourage you not to do that and we may personally think that's a terrible thing, but we don't believe the government has a right to come in and tell you that you can't do that in order to save you from ruining your life — and then they lock you in a cage and thereby ruin your life.



Kim Tavendale.  
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*What kind of outreach are you doing in Colorado in the lead-up to this year's election?*

**JN:** Hopefully we'll have a Gary Johnson appearance in the next few weeks, although he has to schedule all fifty states. We have a few other grassroots kinds of things where we'll go out and hold up signs for people to see. [Click for more information about the [August 27 sign-waving event](#).] Our events are on Meetup. A lot of our outreach happens at places like county fairs or other county events.

**CAH:** We'll definitely be at [Riot Fest](#), too [September 2-4 at the National Western Complex], and the sign events are going to be more exciting than they sound. We're going to be doing a lot

of grassroots efforts, going out into the public. But what we do is different from the two major national parties. We're a bottom-up organization; it's not top-down. So a lot of what happens is almost spontaneous from activists in the counties, and the state party is not terribly involved in that, because that's not the way our organization is set up. It's set up to be very county-level and very activist-level. Let me give you an example. When the election first came around and we were looking for people to run for office, some anonymous person spent thousands of dollars to send mailers to almost every registered Libertarian in Colorado asking them to run for office. We have no idea who did this.

*You still have no idea?*

**CAH:** No — and they're still sending things. This is a big deal and they just do it out of their activism. They just felt a Libertarian duty to get the word out. And that's part of the quirky charm of our party. There's a lot of that. A lot of the activism isn't organized by the state party. We try to organize what we can, but our role is more to be there to provide the anchor for the activists to take the initiative.



Another photo of Gary Johnson in Denver circa 2012.  
Photo by Sam Levin

*What would reaching a certain threshold of the vote nationally do for the party, particularly in qualifying for federal funds?*

**CAH:** At 5 percent of the popular vote, the Libertarian Party could qualify for federal funds — but you just stepped into a bramble bush with that question. The party is very deeply divided over whether we should take the federal welfare check or not — and you can tell where I come down on it by the way I worded that answer. Getting the 5 percent would qualify us, but whether we did or not is another question, and a lot of that will be up to our next candidate. It's not the national party's decision. It's the candidate's decision as to whether they'll take these funds, and they come with all kinds of strings attached. Where the national party would have to make a decision is — and you may not know this — but some of your tax dollars go to fund the big conventions that the Democrats and the Republicans have. They get millions of dollars to host their private conventions. I would hope the Libertarian Party would never do that if we do in fact get to 5 percent.

But more importantly, some states determine their ballot access based upon vote totals in certain key races — and some of them include the presidential race. So us getting a certain percentage is very literally the life of some state parties. We live and die on our ballot access. The hurdles third parties have to get over for ballot access is just shameful that it's going on in a country where we supposedly want to hear the voice of the people. In Colorado, we have arguably the easiest ballot access in the country, so we're spoiled here. But some states have it really, really bad. In Ohio, you can't even run as a Libertarian. We're fighting this, but Gary Johnson will probably be on the ticket as an independent. There was actually a guy in Nevada when we first started and we couldn't get on the ballot as a party — so he actually changed his middle name to "Libertarian." He's now deceased, but he's still a legend in the party: Jim Libertarian Burns. He did that so the word "Libertarian" would be on the ballot. And ballot access is still the life's blood of the party. The national races are the beauty contests, but the local races are, I would argue, even more important. And so Gary Johnson doing well — and I predict that he's going to do well — will secure access for our local candidates. And being a bottom-up organization, we consider local candidates to be extraordinarily precious.

*What would you characterize as success this year? And given the extra attention the Libertarian Party has already attracted lately, have you already achieved success?*

**JN:** It's really hard to measure success the way I like to measure it. Seeing how many people vote Libertarian? That's nice — but that's for this year. A lot of people will vote and disappear for one year or two years or four years. That's one way to measure success. But I would focus more on how many more people are participating with the Libertarian Party. And not just registered voters. If you're unaffiliated but you're coming out and helping and doing things for the party, I would call that success. Getting more people donating to the Libertarian Party, too. That would be more of a success than simply winning elections.

**CAH:** I would agree with you there, but I would also say getting a higher percentage than we've ever gotten before would be the lowest metric I would count for unmitigated success. So it would be for Gary to top what he did before, which I absolutely believe is going to happen. But I'm one of those very, very optimistic people who think Gary's actually going to win a few states, and that would definitely be a success. And if we win a few states and the awful candidates don't get a majority and it gets thrown to the House: Well, then, all bets are absolutely off. This could be such a historic year. It's so terribly exciting that I can barely contain myself.

*For more information about the August 27 event, e-mail [outreachdirector@lpcolorado.org](mailto:outreachdirector@lpcolorado.org).*

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