

Gary Johnson: Townhall Takeaway

If ever there was a time for a third party candidate to swoop in and make legitimate noise, it's 2016. This year's election has been a festival of bad politics, with both major party nominees either embroiled in scandals or repeatedly having to explain some off-color remark. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have divided the nation almost in half while simultaneously having the lowest favorability ratings of any two candidates ever. Watching this electoral train wreck has truly been surreal. In most cases election years tend to be forgotten once the winner emerges; something tells me we'll be talking about the travesty of 2016 for decades to come.

Entering into the fray rather late is Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson. His name and visage have been circulating social media lately. The main pitch, while comically underwhelming and defeatist, is nonetheless true. It's basically this: Hillary and Donald are both terrible. There's always Gary Johnson! Johnson, a relatively unknown former governor from New Mexico, is by no means the lesser of three evils. But undoubtedly his greatest strength is the fact that he's a separate human being from the two abominable choices facing Americans.

On Wednesday night, Anderson Cooper hosted a Town Hall featuring the Libertarian candidate and his running mate, former Massachusetts governor (and the man who spearheaded MCAS testing) William Weld. Based on the radio silence on social media, it would appear that a scant few tuned in. It was nevertheless insightful.

Here are some takeaways:

1. Johnson seems like a genuinely nice guy. He had a soft-

spoken delivery and didn't give off anything close to an air of pomposity or bombast. Most of his answers were short and direct. His eyebrows were constantly pulled slightly upward in that "Aw-shucks-I'm-just-an-average-guy" look. Unlike his two opponents, it would be tough to viscerally dislike the guy based solely on his demeanor.

2. His epistemic humility was praiseworthy. This is a man who seems to know what he doesn't know and has no problem telling you as much. In an age where everyone is pretending to be the smartest person in the room, this is refreshing. At one point when answering an audience question Johnson was bold enough to say, "I could be wrong, but..." Now there's the kind of humility that we need in a leader. If he doesn't know something, Johnson will pursue the people who do.
3. Unfortunately there's a corollary to this humility. At times Johnson appeared unsure or unconfident with his views. His good-old-boy delivery doesn't do him any favors in this department. At times he seemed knowledgeable, at others slightly out of his depth. Understanding his own ignorance is one thing, but on questions that are based on strong ideological points of Libertarianism, one would like to have seen a more comfortable and cocksure delivery. There were points when Weld, his running mate, appeared more in control and presidential.
4. His platform, which is textbook libertarian, provides a solid compromise for the divide between conservatives and liberals. His economics are conservative: Small government, less taxes, place the emphasis on the individual. His social politics are liberal: support LGBT community, resist religious freedom to discriminate, legalize marijuana. He also had a brief, but poignant (albeit noncommittal) response to a question about Black Lives Matter (It woke him up, he said). In addition to these views he is a strong

advocate for States' rights, which provides a degree of malleability to his specific positions.

5. Perhaps his most pertinent and appealing stance – his take on foreign policy – could ironically be the one that does him the most harm. Johnson believes that the U.S. should dial back its military involvement in other countries. He wants decrease participation in regime changes and democracy installations. This non-interventionist approach, while idealistic, is something that will certainly not endear him to many on the Right who harbor grand ideas of strength and American Exceptionalism. His stance here almost seems pacifistic and completely isolationist, which, while enticing, would nearly impossible to implement and could have drastic repercussions.
6. Overall, Johnson had a decent showing (especially when one considers what he's up against). He did have some areas of concern: his tax plan (which includes drastic reductions in income taxes and capital gains taxes, and would be replaced by a high consumption tax) is considerably outside of the norm. His response to terrorism – essentially “It's going to happen...what can you do?” – was not the show of strength towards which many Americans gravitate. He was also weak on specific policy questions about education and medical marijuana.

But in the end, the overall impression was that Johnson (in addition to being an incredible athlete) is a congenial guy who has some pretty dramatic ideas to change America. In an election where people are clamoring for real change, Johnson might be the best choice in that department. Will he be able to overcome the monetary juggernauts of the Trump and Clinton campaigns? Can he generate enough momentum to make the debate stage? I guess we'll have to wait and see.

One thing, though, is certain: in this troublingly weak election year, Johnson and Weld are worth a look.