

Why Joe Biden needs Libertarians

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Joe Biden has already taken a markedly different tack than the multitude of top-tier Democratic challengers. Biden has touted his bipartisan credentials and cited Donald Trump as an aberration. This may be a tricky tactic for the primaries, where you must appeal to the base, but a look at the key numbers of the 2016 election shows this strategy is wise for the general election. Democrats need to consider why the Libertarian Party had astonishing success in 2016 and why those voters may serve as the critical target in 2020.

The recent past shows why both parties need to keep a watchful eye on the Libertarian voters. Just a comparison with another famous third party shows how important the Libertarian vote was in 2016. Democrats have long complained — with good reason — about the role of the Green Party in depriving Al Gore of the White House in 2000. Nader received 2.74 percent of the vote (he did not appear in all states), including 1.63 percent in the critical state of Florida that Gore lost by 537 votes. That 2.74 percent was a strong showing for a third party, but in 2016, the Libertarian Party topped that total.

The Libertarian Party had never before received more than 1.1 percent of the vote in a presidential election. But with New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson and former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld serving as their ticket, the party rocketed to 3.24 percent of the vote. In two of the critical states that Trump flipped, Michigan and Wisconsin, Johnson topped 3.6 percent. In Pennsylvania, the third normally Democratic stronghold that voted GOP, Johnson received 2.4 percent.

Numerous independent candidates have received more than 3 percent of the vote, notably Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 runs. But those candidates either ran as independents or in a special purpose party, one that was effectively created for that candidate. The Libertarians are different. They have run a candidate in every presidential race since 1980 and regularly field candidates in federal and state races throughout the country. Johnson's performance in 2016 is the biggest percentage for any preexisting party since the Socialist Party under Eugene Debs in 1920 topped 6 percent of the vote.

What explains this result? It is possible that the Libertarians have struck a nerve — especially as the Republican Party under Trump moved away from certain Libertarian ideals, and as core libertarian issues such as marijuana legalization have come to the fore. It is also possible that Johnson was a uniquely qualified and likable candidate. But another possibility seems more likely.

The Libertarian Party may have been the choice of the right-wing voters who did not want to vote for Trump and could not pull the lever for Hillary Clinton, much as the Green Party has become a similar protest-vote on the left. It is not clear from the polling, but one of the reasons

for Trump's surprise victory was the cratering in support for Johnson in the waning months of the election. In September, he was polling at 9 percent, which fell off heavily by Election Day.

If this is true, the question is whether, after four years of acclimation to Trump, ex-Republicans who voted for Johnson are willing to now vote for another term of Trump; whether they would be willing once again to go for a Libertarian protest vote; or whether they can be persuaded to vote for the Democratic nominee.

One way or another, there is good reason to believe that the Libertarian vote will fall. Both Perot and Nader saw their support collapse in their subsequent run. Perot lost more than 10 percent of his vote, dropping from 19 percent to 8 percent. Nader (who was not on the ballot in as many states) saw his vote total in Florida go from 1.6 percent in 2000 to .4 percent in 2004.

In both those races, it's arguable that voters who'd previously cast a "protest vote" suddenly saw that the elections were close and that their votes counted. The next time around, they were more willing to look at the major party candidates.

In the upcoming election, Trump seems to be betting that getting his base to turn out will be enough. But with the large and decisive pool of voters who went Libertarian in 2016 still potentially up for grabs, it would be foolish not to pursue every avenue to capture them.

Perhaps Biden, with his bipartisan credentials, can separate Trump from traditional Republicans and Libertarians. For Democrats, winning Libertarian voters may be critical in a close race.

Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He writes for the Recall Elections Blog.