

Politicians: Gary Johnson

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Former Governor of New Mexico Gary Johnson posing for a photo shoot for Reason Magazine in Phoenix, Arizona in 2012. Photo: Gage Skidmore, public domain.

Synopsis: Gary Johnson was born in North Dakota in 1953. He attended the University of New Mexico and started his own construction company, which became a multimillion-dollar business. Johnson won the New Mexico governor's race in 1994 as a Republican and was re-elected four years later. After a failed campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, he became the Libertarian Party candidate for the office that year and again in 2016. He has regularly supported Libertarian causes such as marijuana legalization.

Early Life And Education

Gary Earl Johnson was born on New Year's Day 1953 in Minot, North Dakota. The son of a school teacher father and a mother who worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Johnson grew up in North Dakota and New Mexico. He attended the University of New Mexico, and to help pay for college, he started a handyman business.

A year after graduating with a degree in political science, Johnson started a construction company, Big J Enterprises. What was initially a one-man business got a big break with a large contract from Intel Corp. to expand a manufacturing facility.

The company grew to as many as 1,000 employees, and Johnson sold it in 1999 for a reported \$10 million.

Political Outsider

Johnson entered the Republican primary for governor of New Mexico in 1994. This was despite having no prior political background other than his political science degree.

He surprised many people by winning the four-way Republican primary race by a little more than 1,000 votes. Running on a platform based on cutting spending, he then beat the sitting governor, Democrat Bruce King. Johnson was re-elected in 1998.

During his time as governor, Johnson balanced the state's budget and vetoed more than 750 bills. His campaign website brags about this veto record. The website calls his record a sign of his "resisting the temptation to solve every problem with government spending and regulation."

Term limits meant that Johnson could not run again in 2002. He left office in 2003, rejoining the business world.

Back To Politics

Johnson returned to politics for the 2012 presidential campaign, initially running as a Republican. However, his beliefs did not line up perfectly with what the majority of Republicans believed. Specifically, his beliefs on social issues and the military did not go over well with Republican voters.

He left the Republican race in December 2011 and won the Libertarian Party nomination in 2012. He received about 1 percent of the vote in the general election, the best showing for a Libertarian Party candidate since 1980.

2016 Campaign

Johnson moved his focus to business again following the 2012 campaign. In 2014, he became CEO of a company called Cannabis Sativa Inc., which sells marijuana products. He left the company two years later and again sought the Libertarian nomination for president.

Johnson faced a tough battle for the nomination. Even some Libertarians felt that Johnson did not represent many of the party's beliefs.

A sign of this came shortly after Johnson won the Libertarian nomination on a second ballot, when he told USA Today newspaper that there could be a discussion about laws to keep mentally ill people from getting guns. This was a departure from the party's strong support of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

"I'm looking to get elected president of the United States. I just want to let people know I have an open mind about how we might, how government might, interject itself in a lot of the problems we have," he said.

Policy Views

Johnson positions himself as Republican when it comes to economics, but with some liberal social views such as supporting the legalization of marijuana. He is in favor of cutting government spending and taxes, replacing the current tax system with a national sales tax and immediately bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Johnson's second presidential campaign in the summer of 2016 received more support than his first. However, he did not have enough support in the polls to participate in the first presidential debate with Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump.

"I hope that people will see that we don't have to sit by the sidelines and watch as the two major parties limit their choices to slightly different flavors of the status quo. It is, in fact, possible to join the fray, stand up for principles and offer a real alternative," Johnson says on his campaign website.

The website describes Johnson as "an avid skier, adventurer, ironman, and bicyclist," who has climbed the highest peaks on all seven continents, including Mount Everest. He lives in Taos, New Mexico, is divorced and has two grown children.