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Libertarian Party grows — and so do its critics

By Nicole Ashley

It's a party that started in 1971 with fewer than 4,000 supporters and now has more than 4 million nationwide. The Libertarian Party, which calls itself "The Party of Principle," seems to have had a special appeal during the most recent election—a campaign in which the two major party candidates started out with historically low approval numbers.

In the 2016 presidential election, the Libertarian candidate wound up with more votes than in the past three national elections -- more than 3 percent, compared with less than 1 percent in 2000, 2008 and 2012. That's still a small of the results. The numbers for the Libertarians represent growth – success, incidentally, that has made the party the target of criticism by disappointed supporters of Hillary Clinton, who say that third-party candidates are the reason that Donald Trump won the presidency.

Behind the party's historically strong showing in this election are voters like Doug Braff, 19, a film student at New York University.

Scandals such as Hillary Clinton's use of private email for State Department business and Donald Trump's misogynistic and racist comments, Braff says, made him lose trust in both the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees.

"I couldn't in my right mind vote for Trump or a pathological liar like Hillary," said Braff, who registered as a Libertarian earlier this year.

His political viewpoints, he said, are also the reason that he chose to back Johnson as a candidate. "I'm pro-marriage equality, I'm for a woman's right to choose and I am against the war on drugs," said Braff. "The Libertarian party supports these principles."

Braff worked for the party during the campaign, hitting the streets of Manhattan in the three months preceding the election. With other Johnson supporters, he passed out thousands of flyers urging voters to attend the three Libertarian rallies held in the city.

He got plenty of takers, he said, but also lots of pushback. "There's people that flipped me off and told me that you are voting for the wrong candidate," said Braff.

Johnson, whose poll numbers earlier in the campaign were not high enough to land him a spot on the televised presidential debates, made some now well-known gaffes during television interviews.

On MSNBC's show "Morning Joe," host Mike Barnicle asked Johnson about the war-torn Syrian city of Aleppo. "What is Aleppo?" responded Johnson. Later, on MSNBC's "Hardball," Johnson

could not think of a single foreign leader that he admired after host Chris Matthews posed the question to him and HIS running mate Bill Weld.

Supporters like Braff said that Johnson is entitled to make a mistake. “Donald Trump and Hillary have interviews all the time,” said Braff. “But when Gary Johnson gets one and he slips up, they attack him and say he’s unfit to be president. It’s hypocrisy and it’s unfair.”

And this has unleashed criticism from Clinton supporters who cite the slim margin of victory for Trump in some key states.

For instance, in states such as Michigan, which Donald Trump won by only 11,612 votes, they point to Gary Johnson’s 173,057 votes and argue that if those votes had gone to Clinton, she would have carried the state. She lost two other key states – Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – by similarly tight margins and those three states made Donald Trump president.

After the election, Facebook was filled with posts such as: “Those of you who purposely voted 3rd party because you didn’t want to support Hillary, remember this moment.”

Braff of NYU said that he too has gotten his share of negative social media comments.

“It’s pretty offensive to say that I stole someone’s vote,” he said. “That implies that somehow Hillary Clinton already owns my vote, and that’s unfair to me as a voter.”

But as they have said in past close elections, political analysts stress that it’s hard to determine what third-party voters would have done in the absence of a third party.

“It’s possible that Libertarian voters reduce Trump’s total numbers rather than Clinton’s,” said Tien, a political science professor at Hunter College. “But the other possibility is that without Johnson in the race, those voters might have just stayed home.”

Bruce Cronin, a political science professor at City College, CUNY, believes that if Johnson voters decided to vote for another candidate, they most likely would have voted Republican. That’s because, like Republicans, the Libertarians support less foreign intervention, lower taxes and balancing the federal budget.

“Libertarians are opposed to government intervention and when dealing with economics, they are as conservative as Republicans,” said Cronin.

With all this, Libertarians like Doug Braff believe the work of the Libertarian party will continue.

“I’m still going to be advocating Libertarian causes like ending the war on drugs and balancing the federal budget,” says Braff. “The fight never ends.”

