

Looks like Green Party's Howie Hawkins is now the marijuana candidate in 2020

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Lee DeVito

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Courtesy of Howie Hawkins

OK, we were wrong. U.S. Rep. Justin Amash of Michigan won't be the pro-marijuana candidate of the 2020 presidential race after all, since he ended his Libertarian Party campaign after just a few weeks earlier this spring. And it seems like the Libertarian Party isn't pushing the cannabis issue too hard this year.

Dr. Jo Jorgensen wound up clinching the Libertarian Party nomination. Marijuana, however, is not highlighted specifically on her website. When asked of her position on cannabis by *Metro Times*, a spokesperson says, "Dr. Jorgensen favors the repeal of all victimless crime laws, including those restricting the sale and use of cannabis. She supports full legalization of cannabis. She would pardon all non-violent offenders on her first day in office."

Of course, that seems to be better than the two major-party candidates. Cannabis reform is not mentioned on Republican President Donald Trump's website, though he has reportedly discussed possibly supporting a bill called the STATES Act, which would allow states to set their own marijuana laws without federal intervention. However, the bill would not federally de-schedule, or legalize, cannabis — and even then, that's far from a campaign promise from Trump at this point.

Meanwhile, presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden has been criticized by Trump for being an "architect" of the War on Drugs due to his role in the 1994 Crime Bill. His stance on marijuana has changed since then, but he has also stopped short of calling for legalizing marijuana, though he said he would decriminalize it. He caught flak for an interview with *The Breakfast Club's* Charlamagne Tha God, who asked him about the difference between legalizing marijuana and decriminalizing. Biden responded that scientists still have to first "find out whether or not there is any impact on the use of marijuana, not in leading you to other drugs, but what it affects. Does it affect long-term development of the brain and we should wait until the studies are done."

(Our first choice, Sen. Bernie Sanders, would have truly been the marijuana candidate, saying he would legalize weed on his first day in office, but he suspended his campaign to support Biden.)

So that brings us to the Green Party candidate and presumptive nominee Howie Hawkins. Or rather, that brings Hawkins to us. Shortly after we published a blog post about Amash and cannabis, a Hawkins aide emailed us to insist upon Hawkins' marijuana bona fides, directing us to a lengthy statement on his Hawkins' website titled "Legalizing marijuana and end the War on Drugs," and offered an interview.

OK, with everything going on right now — a once-in-a-generation plague, an economic depression, the frightening possibility of a second term of Trump — why is any of this important? Well, for one, we like weed. And we're not alone. The American people are much further ahead than the major-party candidates on pot. A Pew Research poll found two-thirds of Americans support marijuana legalization. Thirty-three states have legalized medical cannabis, and 11 states have legalized recreational use, including Michigan in 2018.

Born in San Francisco and now based in Syracuse, New York, Hawkins joined the Green

Party when it formed in the 1980s. Since then, he has ran for various offices as the Green Party candidate, though unsuccessfully, including U.S. Senate in 2006, Governor of New York in 2010, 2014, and 2018, and Mayor of Syracuse in 2017. This is his first time running for president.

This week, he and running mate Angela Walker won enough delegates to secure the Green Party nomination. The Party originally planned to hold its nominating convention in Detroit at Wayne State University on July 9-12, but it was shifted to a virtual format due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Hawkins says that cannabis legalization has been on the Green Party agenda as long as he can remember. "But the use of marijuana is a big problem at the federal level right now," he says.

"New York, where I live, is the world's capital for marijuana arrests," he says. "They're filling the prison system, the law enforcement system, and the criminal justice system with cases that they shouldn't even be bothering with." The problem is exacerbated, he says, by civil asset forfeiture, which incentivizes police departments to use marijuana crimes as a way to seize peoples' property to sell to raise revenue.

"Jails are expanding because of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration," he says. "We have 25% of the world's prison population but only 4% of the world's population. So we want to reverse that."

Though Biden has called for decriminalization and expungement of convictions for marijuana-related crimes, Hawkins thinks that doesn't go far enough. "[It's] a positive step forward," he says. "But I think the politicians are behind the public on this. They're afraid of the public. They're afraid to stick their neck out. I mean, you know, the Democrats are usually seen as the socially liberal party, but if you follow issues like marijuana legalization or gay marriage, they don't move until public opinion is really clear. So I think Biden kind of epitomizes this being super cautious rather than deciding what's a real solution and fighting for it."

"He's putting his finger to the wind and seeing how far he can go, but meanwhile, it's a huge problem for all the people whose families are disrupted because of marijuana busts," Hawkins says. "Instead of addressing the problem, he's polling ... he's not being a leader, deciding what's a good policy and then advocating for that. He's sort of just seeing what the public will accept and pretty much avoiding it. He hasn't put this issue front and center in any, in any regard, you know, even when he's asked about it."

As far as Trump's aversion to marijuana goes, "I think trying to appeal to the law and order mentality, and the culture wars," Hawkins says.

In the long-shot chance he is elected President, Hawkins says he "would have the Justice

Department stop telling the States that have legalized [marijuana that] we're coming after you. And then I would try to get that federal law changed so we could have marijuana be legal. To me, it's less harmful than alcohol and tobacco, which are legal. So, you know, let's just use common sense here." Plus, the sale of legal cannabis would generate tax revenue.

Going even further, Hawkins says he calls for the decriminalization of harder drugs, too, like Portugal did in 2001. "[There] it's a violation, it's not a criminal charge," he says. "In Portugal, they meet with a lawyer, a social worker, and a doctor, and they look at your situation and see how they might help. Do you need a job? Do you need drug treatment? Do you need counseling because you're using the drugs to cope with some other issue? And even if you don't want any help and you just want to go back out and get high, you pay a fine and go about your business. They still enforce drug trafficking, but the personal use is not a criminal violation. And as a result, they have less people in prison, and O.D.s have [dropped]. There's not the kind of crime and violence around the drug trade at the street level. They greatly reduce the harm, and in fact, they are less people using the hard drugs now than when they started their policy."

Hawkins thinks a similar approach could help in the U.S., which was hit hard by the opioid crisis. "People are afraid to get help," he says. "They get addicted sometimes just because they were given a prescription by a doctor. I had an inguinal hernia operation and they handed me a bottle of Percocet without any warning. They just said, 'here take this.' Then I had talked to a guy who had got it and he said it made him constipated. And, you know, having that observation, I didn't want to be constipated after that operation. So I just didn't use them. I didn't even know the danger [of addiction]. And that's a huge problem, and then that becomes expensive for people. So they go to the street and get heroin, and they don't know what they're getting. A lot of people have died. So it'd be much better to make this an addiction problem. You can go get help instead of just trying to maintain your addiction with the illegal trafficking on the street that just creates all kinds of problems."

'I think the politicians are behind the public on this. They're afraid of the public. They're afraid to stick their neck out.' [click to tweet](#)

Despite their popularity with voters, Hawkins is doubtful these issues will resonate in 2020 due to the dual coronavirus and economic crises. "Now consumers are going to be reluctant to spend on anything, essentially to the extent they have the money to do that, and investors are going to be leery of risky new investments in that climate," he says. "So that's a recipe for longterm depression." Hawkins calls for an "Ecosocialist Green New Deal" that would help fight the climate crisis, which could include an economic bill of rights to deal with poverty and economic despair.

He thinks the Green Party should resonate with voters who supported Bernie Sanders, but also non-voters. "We're also trying to appeal to the people that don't vote, working-class people, people of color, and young people," he says. "We're trying to give them a message that they can get behind and get engaged because right now, people say they're apathetic."

I've done a lot of door-knocking. People are alienated. They just don't trust the two parties. They feel like the parties and the politicians don't know them, don't know what their problems are, and don't care about them. So, you know, we're trying to reach those folks and if we could reach all of them, we'd be a major party."

Of course, that has yet to happen. The best the Green Party ever did in a Presidential election was Ralph Nader's 2000 campaign, which earned just 2.7% of the vote — enough for critics to blame him for tipping the close election to George W. Bush. In 2016, Green Party candidate Jill Stein earned just 1.7% percent of the vote, again earning accusations that she helped tip the election to Trump.

Hawkins disputes that Stein cost Hillary Clinton the election, saying exit polls found 61% of Stein's voters wouldn't have voted for president if she wasn't in the race. "I always say it wasn't the Greens, it wasn't the Russians, it was the electrical college," he says. "They put Trump in office, even though he lost the popular vote by 3 million votes."

"Of course the most common question is 'why are you going to spoil the election for Biden?'" Hawkins says. "And of course my answer is we've been given not the proven, nonpartisan answer to that, and that is to replace the electoral college with a rank choice, national popular vote for president."

Hawkins says that by running, the Green Party forces the Democratic Party to bend to the left, pointing to the time in 2014 that he ran against Andrew Cuomo for Governor and earned 5% of the vote. "He looked at our 5%, and he couldn't take us for granted anymore," Hawkins says. "And he ended up adopting three of our demands that he had never supported before — a ban on fracking, a \$15 minimum wage, and paid family leave."

"The way I look at it, Biden should crush Trump, because Trump's response to the coronavirus crisis is so plainly incompetent," he says. "And then he's got this economic depression that he doesn't have any answers for. But Biden's sort of been invisible."

Hawkins says at the very least, he hopes he can get some of the issues he advocates for into the larger narrative, working to get on all 51 ballots. So far, he's about halfway there.

"We've got a significant campaign, and hopefully we can translate that into getting some of these issues debated that we're trying to raise," he says.

Your move, Biden.

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