

## **How Fiscally Conservative? Gary Johnson's Spending Record vs. his Republican Contemporaries**

**By Tristan Goodwin with Paul Gessing  
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The 2016 presidential election has been like few others. For a number of reasons, the Libertarian Party candidate, former New Mexico Gary Johnson, has gained unprecedented levels of interest as he fights for inclusion in the presidential debates to be held later this year. Fiscally-conservative Republicans, many of whom may be concerned about the rhetoric of their party's standard-bearer Donald Trump, may be looking for alternatives.

Former New Mexico governor and current Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson is a likely alternative for these disenchanted voters, but his spending record has come under attack from some corners. In a *National Review* column, writer James Spiller argued that the record of former New Mexico governor and current Libertarian candidate for president Gary Johnson is [“not conservative and not even all that libertarian”](#) based largely on Johnson's fiscal record which he further labels “big-government.”

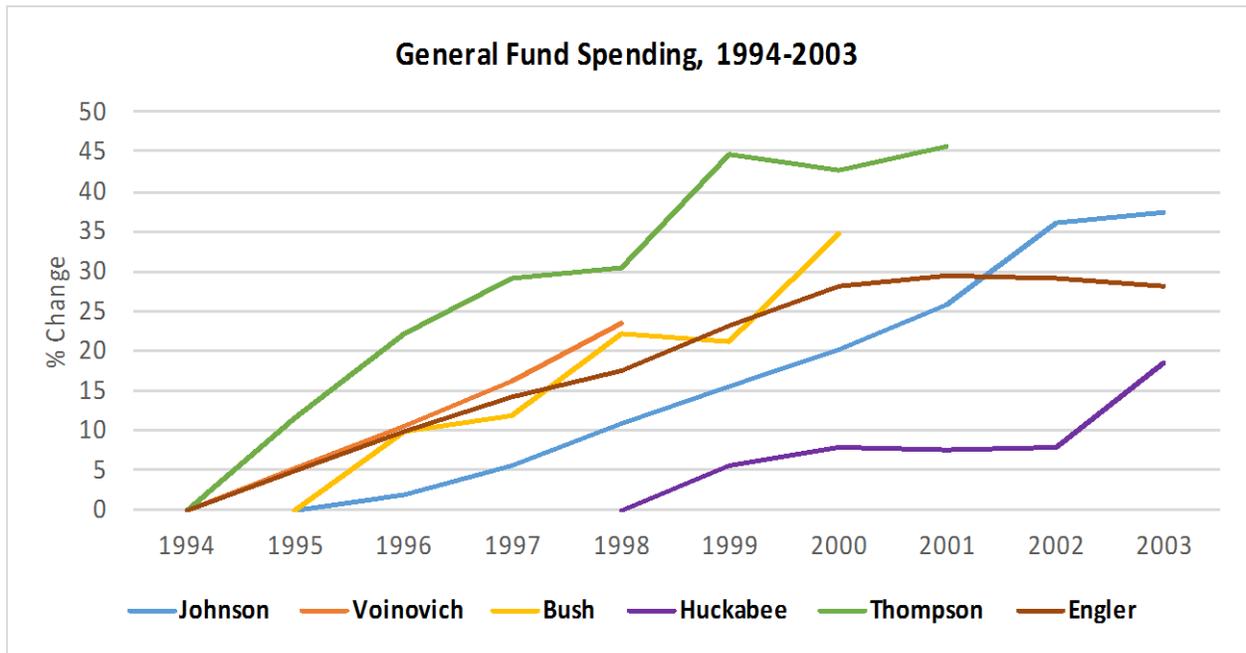
Is this true? Is Gary Johnson really just another big-government politician?

Before answering that question, it is worth noting that a governor's role in the budgetary process is necessarily cooperative. Proposing and vetoing the budget cannot accomplish a policy agenda, and when the legislature is held by a different party, it is even harder to hold a governor accountable for every bit of spending which crosses their desk. Deciding how fiscally conservative or liberal a governor is necessitates examining the legislative climate under which they operated.

From that perspective, it is worth noting that in the absence of Gary Johnson, spending in New Mexico would likely have been much higher. Johnson claims to have turned away 750 bills during his tenure which lasted from 1995-2002. [Independent research](#) found that he actually vetoed 739 bills, but that analysis doesn't account for “line-items.” Regardless, Johnson vetoed far more bills than other contemporary Republican governors. Johnson's frequent use of the veto pen is ultimately his biggest tool for directly reducing spending. His efforts should be a major point in his favor for fiscal conservatives.

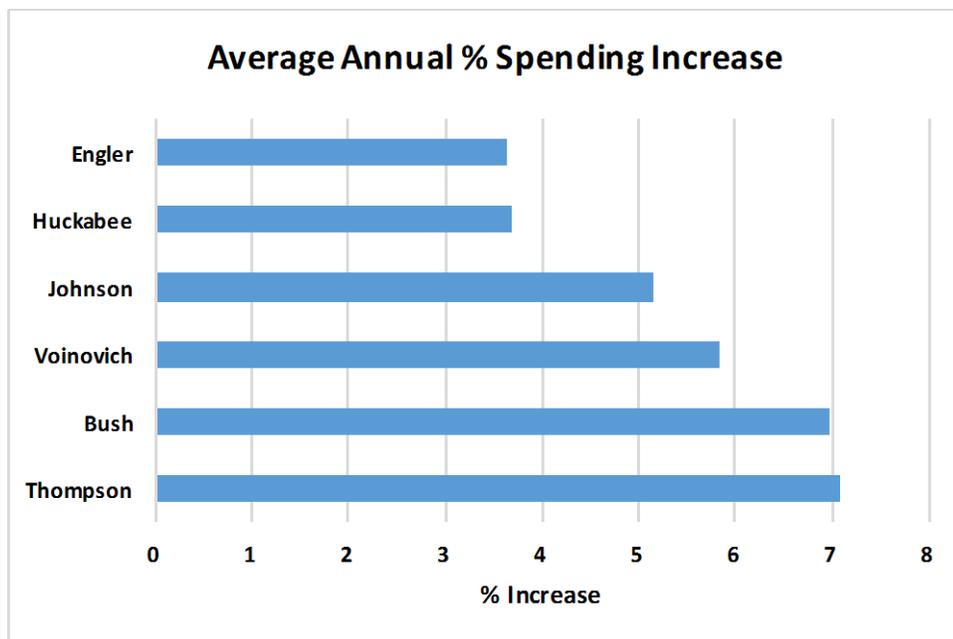
To understand Johnson's use of the veto, it is worth understanding a bit about New Mexico politics. Throughout his tenure, Johnson contended with Democratic majorities in both of New Mexico's legislative bodies. Overall, these majorities amounted to 60 percent of all legislators being Democrats during Johnson's term. Outnumbered in the legislature, Johnson's veto pen became his primary weapon.

Did Johnson's veto pen stem the spending tide? Not entirely. Johnson's term was marked by a 37.4% spending increase.



But how does that record stack up with the spending of other Republican governors of the same era?

As seen in the charts below, an examination of some of his fellow governors' records shows that Johnson's discretionary spending record is better than those of many of his most prominent Republican contemporaries (several of whom ran for president).



**Tommy Thompson**, the Republican governor of Wisconsin from 1987 to 2001, raised spending by 42.5% between 1994 and 2000 despite his party [controlling](#) at least one legislative body every year between 1992 and 2002. On average, he raised spending 7.1% per year, compared to Johnson's 5.1%. Thompson both ran for president and was considered to be a policy reformer of his day.

These comparisons aren't exact, since Thompson's and Johnson's terms don't overlap exactly. However, they're close enough to show that Johnson was more fiscally conservative on the whole.

**George W. Bush** was Texas' Governor from 1995-2000 term. He was also the most politically successful Republican to be governor during the 1990s, having left office during his 2<sup>nd</sup> term to run for, and win, the White House. It shouldn't be too surprising that spending rose more quickly under Bush than Johnson. In those years, Texas saw its general fund spending increase by 34.8%, compared to New Mexico, which experienced a 20% increase over the same period. While Bush never had a Republican majority in the State House, the Senate has been held by Republicans since 1997. Bush's term includes one year, 1999, when spending actually went down. Even so, this decrease was balanced out by substantial increases in other years.

Bush was not a fiscally-conservative president by any stretch of the imagination, but there were few critics on the political right that claimed Bush should not be president due to his mediocre fiscal record as Texas governor.

**Mike Huckabee and John Engler:** Another aspirant to the presidency, Huckabee is more known for his religiosity and socially-conservative policies than his fiscal leadership as Governor of Arkansas. Nonetheless, Gary Johnson's record on fiscal policy pales relative to that

of Huckabee. He and Michigan's John Engler both raised spending at a lower rate than did Johnson. Their rates were similar, at about 3.6% per year. Huckabee managed this low increase despite having to deal with a [Democratic-controlled General Assembly](#) for most of his term.

Engler found more support than Johnson or Huckabee, as Michigan Republicans [held majorities](#) in the state Senate for all of his term, and the House for most of it. Huckabee and Johnson, despite having similarly divided governments, spent at different rates. This could imply a number of differences between the states, including different views among Democrats on how much spending is necessary, or different amounts of influence held by the governor.

**George Voinovich:** Voinovich and Johnson raised spending at similar rates (5.8 and 5.1% per year, respectively). The late Voinovich was a well-known ["debt hawk"](#) in the Senate, and attempted to streamline Ohio's state government while he was governor there. His cause was helped by Republican majorities in both legislative bodies from 1995 until he left office in 1998. Even then, he raised spending slightly more than Johnson did on average.

### **Conclusion**

This comparison of Gary Johnson's fiscal record may leave some Libertarian party faithful cold. After all, libertarians are supposed to have a dramatically-circumscribed view of the role of government. This implies annual spending cuts or at the very least limiting growth to the combined rates of inflation and population growth (thus not increasing "real" spending). By this measure, Johnson indeed qualifies as a relatively "big spender."

Fortunately, Johnson is attempting to appeal to a far-broader swath of the American electorate, one that doesn't necessarily care as much about perfection on fiscal issues as do policy wonks in Washington.

It is more relevant to compare his record to those of Republican governors in office at the

same time. From that perspective Johnson fits comfortably within the scope of likely candidates for higher office.

Governors, like presidents, must work with legislators of both parties in order to compile a budget. Johnson's vetoes clearly indicate that he wished New Mexico's government to spend less than did many legislators of both parties. Despite complete Democratic control of New Mexico's legislative budgetary process throughout his time in office, Johnson's spending record holds up reasonably when compared to other prominent Republican governors of his day.

If he were to be elected president, Gary Johnson has plenty of experience dealing with politicians that wish to spend more money than he does. The experience of saying “no” more than 700 times may be the most relevant for bringing fiscal constraint to Washington, DC.

### **About the Authors**

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