

Third-party candidate Evan McMullin is surging in Utah

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Two months after he jumped into the presidential race as a political unknown on the fringe, independent candidate Evan McMullin is surging in the polls in Utah and drawing large crowds at rallies as he becomes the conduit for conservative voters fed up with Republican Donald Trump's crudeness and antics.

The Republican stronghold of Utah is suddenly a toss-up state amid widespread rejection of Trump, with polls showing McMullin closing in on the Republican nominee and Democrat Hillary Clinton. It means that Utah may do what seemed unthinkable: Elect a non-Republican presidential candidate for the first time since 1964.

Though McMullin is only on the ballot in 11 states, there's even talk of the 40-year-old becoming president in a wild, exceedingly unlikely scenario in which neither Trump or Democrat Hillary Clinton gets enough electoral votes and Congress is left to decide.

McMullin's stunning ascent into relevancy has everyone asking: Who is this guy?

Born in Provo, Utah — the heartland of Mormon country — McMullin spent his childhood in a rural



Eli Lucero/The Herald Journal via AP, File

In this Oct. 12 photo, Evan McMullin, a third-party candidate for president, speaks at a town hall meeting in Logan, Utah.

area of Washington outside Seattle. He did a two-year Mormon mission in Brazil and then returned to Utah to earn a degree in international law and diplomacy at the Mormon church-owned Brigham Young University.

He spent 11 years in the CIA doing counter-terrorism work before leaving the agency to get a master's in business administration from the Wharton School of Business and have a brief stint in investment

banking. He later became a national security adviser for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

He was working as the chief policy director for U.S. House Republicans as he watched with amazement as Trump won the GOP nomination and no other conservative jumped in the race. By late summer, he realized he would have to run to give conservative voters an alternative to Trump and Clinton. Despite knowing he

would endure ridicule and questions about his motives, McMullin went for it.

McMullin is hopeful he can win Utah and make a dent in neighboring Idaho and Wyoming. But even if he doesn't win any state, he said he's already accomplished part of what he set out to do.

"We believe it's time in this country for a new conservative movement," McMullin said. "That would be a conservative movement that's welcoming to people of all races and religions... It's a conservatism that is compassionate and wants to help people and understands people's struggles and help them through these struggles."

Damon Cann was a roommate of McMullin's for three months in 1999 when they lived together at BYU housing in Virginia. Cann, now a Utah State University political scientist, remembers McMullin being an ambitious young man with a high motor who was very excited about starting his career in the CIA, taking very seriously all the agency rules. He even insisted on reporting an encounter with foreigners from across the hall who gave them cookies, Cann remembers.

Handicapping this year's race, Cann said McMullin has seized the opportunity created by the unpopularity of Trump and Clinton by

persuading voters he's a better option than Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, whose policies don't quite jibe with Utah's culture. That includes being pro-abortion rights and accepting the legalization of gay marriage.

His choice of a woman as his running mate, Republican campaign strategist Mindy Finn, is just one part of his campaign that has endeared him to Utah voters, especially young Mormons, Cann said.

"People tend to have a higher level of social trust for people who are in the same group," Cann said. "LDS people find Evan McMullin to be trustworthy on the account he shares their religious identification."

McMullin, who is unmarried with no kids, downplays the role his religion is playing in his ascent.

"It's about principles. They're not only Mormon principles, they are the principles of millions of Americans," McMullin said. "I am the only true conservative in this race."

If McMullin wins Utah, he would be the first independent presidential candidate to win electoral votes since George Wallace in 1968.

Matthew Burbank, an associate professor of political science at the University of Utah, predicts Trump will narrowly win the state, making McMullin mainly an historical footnote similar to

Ross Perot's 1992 showing in Utah when he finished second to George H.W. Bush but ahead of Bill Clinton.

But he's among those impressed by how well McMullin has maneuvered this year's bizarre political landscape to earn widespread attention.

McMullin's strategy to stake out general, conservative ideas seems to be working because most voters aren't looking for detailed plans about what he would do as president because they know that's not realistic.

"He's primarily a symbolic conservative," Burbank said. "As long as he holds that position, some Utah voters will look at that and say, 'I'd rather vote for him.'"

Clinton camp preparing for possibility Trump won't concede

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. (AP) — Hillary Clinton's campaign is increasingly preparing for the possibility that Donald Trump may never concede the presidential election should she win, a development that could enormously complicate the crucial early weeks of her preparations to take office.

Aiming to undermine any argument the Republican nominee may make about a "rigged" election, she hopes to roll up a large electoral vote margin in next month's election. That could repudiate the New York billionaire's message and project a governing mandate after the bitter, divisive presidential race.

Clinton's team is also keeping a close eye on statements by national Republican leaders, predicting they could play an important role in how Trump's accusations of electoral fraud might be perceived. That's according to several Clinton campaign aides, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss internal strategy.

Campaign officials stress they are not taking the outcome of the election for granted. But Clinton and her team have begun thinking about how to position their candidate during the postelection period. Long one of the country's most polarizing political figures, Clinton has begun telling audiences she'll need their help in healing the country.

"I've got to figure out how we heal these divides," she said in a Friday interview with a Tampa radio station WBTP. "We've got to get together. Maybe that's a role that is meant to be for my presidency if I'm so fortunate to be there."

A refusal by Trump to accept the election results would not only upend a basic tenet of American democracy, but also force Clinton to create a new playbook for handling the transfer of power. And a narrow victory would make it more difficult for her to claim substantial political capital at the start of her administration.

While Clinton's campaign has long focused on maintaining pathways to cross the threshold of 270 electoral votes, it's now looking to capture an expanded number of states that could also help determine control of the Senate — including Republican-leaning Arizona.

Polls indicate that Clinton has extended her advantage in several toss-up states during the three fall debates, giving her campaign more confidence. She has maintained stable leads in states such as Pennsylvania, Virginia and Colorado, as well as a narrow edge in Florida and North Carolina.

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