

Cornel West for President in 2024?

written by Dan La Botz | August 20, 2024

This is the latest in a series of articles on Black candidates for President or Vice-President of the United States. Links to all of the articles in the series can be found at the end of this one. – DL



Cornel West for President

Dr. Cornel West, one of America's most distinguished Black intellectuals, announced in June that he was running for president of the United States. West is a 71-year-old theologian and leftist social critic who has been associated with several of America's most important institutions of higher learning, among them: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the Union Theological Seminary. He is the author of some twenty books, the teacher of popular courses on philosophy and African American studies. He has often joined social demonstrations, been arrested several times in such protests, and he has served as an honorary chair of the Democratic Socialists of America. He is a big, public personality, having made appearances in the "Matrix" films and in the comedy series "30 Rock," as well as singing John Mellencamp's "Jim Crow" and recording hip hop music with his group Cornel West Theory. He has appeared on scores of television shows debating social issues and advocating left positions in his often long-winded and flamboyant style that combines high-flown theory with down-to-earth practical arguments. He speaks in the style of a Biblical prophet, a Baptist preacher, but informed by his Christian socialist politics and humanitarian values.

Upbringing and Education

West was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and grew up in Sacramento, California. His family was middle class; his mother was a school teacher and principal and his father a subcontractor for the U.S. Defense Department. A teenager in the 1960s, he attended John F. Kennedy High School where he organized to demand Black Studies programs and joined civil rights demonstrations. In a first foray into politics, he was elected student body president. Already in those years he was influenced by Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and James Cone's Black theology.

His grandfather, Clifton L. West, Sr., had been pastor of the Tulsa Metropolitan Baptist Church, and perhaps that influenced him to pursue studies that would lead to his career as a theologian. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he studied philosophy and graduated with a degree in Near Eastern

languages and civilization, foundational for Biblical studies. Attracted to the Black Panther Party, he hesitated to join and instead he did social work through the churches, such as breakfast programs and prisoner support. In explaining why he didn't become a Panther he said,

I could never join because of my Christian faith, You had to be an atheist. My whole life as a person on the left, I've been saying, I'm with you, but I'm a Christian. I'm with you in part because I'm a Christian. But I'm never fully with you because I'm a Christian.

After Harvard West went on to Princeton where he earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy in 1980, the first Black student to do so. He wrote his dissertation on the topic *Ethics, Historicism, and the Marxist Tradition*, later published under the title *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*. He went on to teach at Harvard, the Yale Divinity School, and the Union Theological Seminary.

He had an academic career that was both stellar and tumultuous, with occasional conflicts with the institutions. Hired by Harvard in a tenure track position, he resigned in 2002 after a dispute with university president Lawrence Summers, though later he returned in 2016. In 2021 he again resigned from Harvard claiming that he had been denied tenure because of his criticism of Israel and sympathy with the Palestinians. He accused Harvard of "intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy of deep depths." He wrote that the university suffered from "decline and decay" as well as "spiritual rot." He complained that the university administration had been unsupportive and unsympathetic to him when his mother died. In another place he wrote, "Is Harvard a place for a free Black man like myself whose Christian faith and witness put equal value on Palestinian and Jewish babies - like all babies - and reject all occupations as immoral?"

West's personal life is as complicated as his academic career. He has been married five times, all of which ended in divorce. With his wife Irene B. West he had a son, Clifton. He also had a "love relationship" with a Kurdish journalist that produced a daughter, Zeytun, who lives in Germany. And there were other affairs and children. He reportedly has few friends, but among them is the media entrepreneur Tavis Smiley who serves as his business manager, publicist, and sometimes his book publisher.

Political Activism

Throughout most of his life, West had been a progressive, or better, a social democrat whose politics were very similar to those of the old Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in which organization he held an honorary chair. Unlike DSA, which nearly always endorses Democrats for partisan office, West vacillated between supporting Democrats and independent candidates. In 2000, West was an enthusiastic supporter of Ralph Nader's Green Party campaign for president, calling him the "Grand Captain of the ship of freedom." Four years later, however, he joined a group of liberals in urging progressives to turn their back on Nader and support Democrat John Kerry. Their open letter read: "We urge support for Kerry-Edwards in all swing states, even while we strongly disagree with Kerry's policies on Iraq and other issues....For people seeking progressive social change in the United States, removing George W. Bush from office should be the top priority."

Not surprisingly, in 2007 speaking at the Apollo Theater in Harlem alongside Barack Obama, then running for president, West told the crowd, "He's an eloquent brother, He's a good brother, he's a decent brother." But then West found Obama's first term in office terribly disappointing and in May of 2011 he declared in an interview in *Truthdig*, that Obama was "the black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs." He also called him "a Rockefeller Republican in black face." Asked in 2017 if he regreted what he had said about Obama, he replied, "Oh, no. I told the truth. When I said drone strikes are

crimes against humanity, when I said Obama bailed out Wall Street rather than Main Street — I shall forever support that.”

But his break with Obama did not represent a definitive break with the Democratic Party, not in the face of the rise of Donald J. Trump. In 2016, West endorsed Senator Bernie Sanders, but critically and with reservations:

My endorsement of Brother Bernie in the primaries is not an affirmation of the neo-liberal Democratic Party or a downplaying of the immorality of the ugly Israeli occupation of Palestinians. I do so because he is a long-distance runner with integrity in the struggle for justice for over 50 years. Now is the time for his prophetic voice to be heard across our crisis-ridden country, even as we push him with integrity toward a more comprehensive vision of freedom for all.

Once Sanders was out of the race, West endorsed Green Party candidate Dr. Jill Stein. Taking an opportunity to dis Hillary Clinton, he called Stein “the only progressive woman in the race.”

In 2020, West again backed Bernie Sanders. After the 2020 election, West explained why he had not supported Joe Biden: “What we got to vote for [was] the mediocre, milquetoast neoliberal centrist because he’s better than fascism, and a fascist catastrophe is worse than a neoliberal disaster.”

Now, finally West seems to have broken with the Democrats. In August of 2023 West explained on Meet the Press on NBC why he was running an independent campaign. “Neither party is speaking to the needs of poor and working people,” he said. “The two-party system is becoming an impediment to flowering of American democracy. There is increasing rot in the system with two parties connected to big money, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and militarism abroad.” Earlier this year, West told Al Jazeera, “I’m running to be head of the American empire in order to dismantle the American empire.”

West defended himself—extremely ineffectively—against the charge of being a spoiler who would help Trump saying, “The vast number of voters who would vote for the Green Party and myself either would not vote at all, or would never, ever, ever vote for Biden or Trump.”



West’s campaign as he imagines it. Image courtesy of Cornel West.

The 2024 Presidential Campaign

In June 2023, West announced that he would seek to be the presidential candidate of the People's Party in 2024. "I have decided to run for truth and justice, which takes the form of running for president of the United States as a candidate for the People's Part. And the presidency is just one vehicle we pursue that truth and justice."

The Movement for a People's Party, led by former Bernie Sanders staffer Nick Brana, was formed in 2017 as a leftist pressure group aimed at getting Bernie Sanders to leave the Democratic Party and run an independent political campaign. When that effort failed, the People's Party became an independent political party. In December of 2020, the PP announced that both West and media personality Jimmy Dore had joined the new party. The party claims to have 150,000 members, though it appeared on the ballot of only one state, Florida.

Signing up with The People's Party would prove to be a demonstration of very poor judgement. The PP maintains its progressive program, but it has taken some stands and suffered some internal conflicts that call its ideals into question. The PP made a move to the right, forming an alliance with the rightwing Libertarian Party in the Rage Against the War Machine demonstrations held on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine calling for an end to U.S. military support for Ukraine and a stop to Ukraine's war for its sovereignty against the Russian aggressor.

Party leader Brana wrote on Twitter on Feb. 20, 2023, "Rage Against the War Machine was incredible! Thousands of people rallied and our march stretched several blocks. We brought left and right together to stop this war in Ukraine. The anti-war movement is BACK!" This is what is sometimes called a "red-brown" alliance, nominally leftist parties joining with rightist parties, now a disturbing phenomenon around the world. Whether the PP will establish closer ties with the Libertarians or other rightwing groups is not clear.

Brana, who has led the party since its founding, also faced a serious charge in 2022 of sexual assault against Zana Day, with Paula Jean Swearengin saying she had witnessed the event. All three were PP leaders. With Brana still leading the party, a ten-member investigative committee was formed (Brana and his father were members). One of the committee's members says that several on the committee, "believed the accuser," but then three of its members were expelled from the party. So far as we know, no legal charges appear to have been filed against Brana.

Zana Day, the alleged victim of the assault, wrote on Twitter on July 10 last year, "The Board majority, staff, and Vols [volunteers] were removed to cover up. Multiple stories, with even audio recordings, show the People's Party and the abuser lying about the investigation." The People's Party has posted statements claiming that the allegations against Brana were part of a smear campaign and an attempt at a liberal takeover of the party. Whatever may be the truth, the handling of the matter was far from ideal. That was the outfit that West had joined.

On June 14, West announced that he had left the People's Party and would seek the nomination of the larger and better-known Green Party as the vehicle for his campaign. Then he changed his mind again, and on October 5, 2023, he announced that he was ending his candidacy for the Green Party nomination and would run as an independent candidate. Then on February 1, 2024, he announced the establishment of the Justice for All Party and that he would be its candidate. In April he chose as his running mate Melina Abdullan, college professor and author of books on race and women's reproductive rights. The Justice for all Party has chapters in only a few states and has not yet held a convention and so far, no date is planned. West as of this writing at the end of August appears on fewer than ten state ballots and has been disqualified in some states. Republican firms that collect ballot signatures have helped his campaign, but this is a common Republican tactic that has occurred with other left-leaning candidates intended to take votes from the Democrats, so West can't necessarily be held responsible for that.

West is running on a social democratic platform titled “Policy Pillars For A Movement Rooted In Truth, Justice, & Love” that is far to the left of anything that moderates in the Democratic Party would entertain but not so different from Senator Bernie Sanders’ campaign platform. Two strong planks call for the nationalization of the fossil fuel industry and the nationalization of the health care industry. Regarding the Middle East the platform calls for:

Ending Military Funding to Israel and advocating for Palestinian dignity and liberation mark a significant stance against oppression and for the rights of all people to live in peace and security. This policy is a call for the United States to lead with moral clarity in promoting justice and an end to apartheid conditions.

Good principles and positions.

The problem is that West and the Justice Party do not represent any significant social movements. The Black, women’s, LGBTQ, and labor organizations all support Kamala Harris and the Democrats. The uncommitted movement in support of Palestine, for a ceasefire, and for an end to U.S. funding of Israel, has expressed no significant interest in West. So far his campaign has been limited mostly to interviews by the media or social media. He has held a few small rallies: one in Harlem and another in Las Vegas. And he joined a Palestine solidarity rally at Harvard. Three quarters of the American people have never heard of him and only about 10 or 15 percent are favorably inclined. A poll in January said he could receive 2% of the vote—and polling experts say that candidates generally fall short of their standing in early polls.

West, who has burnished his image as the Christian socialist candidate, the one man who stands for economic, social, and political justice, will have to convince the public to ignore a few blotches on his escutcheon. One stain on his reputation has to do with his financial problems. Zach Everson of *Forbes* magazine who has researched West’s finances, learning a lot from several divorce filings, says that West, whose salaries as a professor ran between \$115,000 to \$230,000, but who had other sources of income from books, recordings, and speaking engagements, has earned about \$500,000 each year and has made about \$15 million over the past 30 years. Yet he is deeply in debt and owes the U.S. government and some state governments more than \$500,000 in back taxes, which has resulted in tax liens against his property.

In part, this has to do with his lifestyle. As he has said himself in his autobiography, he spent his money on women. He owned a Mercedes and a Cadillac at the same time and owned a condo in the Four Seasons while he also maintained an apartment for extramarital affairs. He took his women companions to expensive restaurants and shows. He has been married five times, and has had to pay alimony and child support. Throughout his high-rolling times, he failed to pay his taxes on his earnings and real estate. While running for president, his sabbatical will end and he will have no income for part of this year. As commentators have pointed out, West, who is himself in the 1% of earnings and wealth, calls for higher taxes on the rich, but then doesn’t pay his. West says the question of his taxes is irrelevant and is only raised to distract voters from the issues of inequality and poverty that he raises.

There are other problems as well. West has always called himself a Christian socialist and a democratic socialist, but he has in recent years increasingly aligned himself with campist or Stalinist political groups. As an article in *Mother Jones* noted, “West is moving beyond the DSA and forging bonds with far-left activists who call for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, who support the Chinese and North Korean regimes, and who are associated with communist organizations and Russian state propaganda operations.” The author, David Corn, explains, “What has brought West

into this circle is his opposition to US military assistance for Ukraine.” This has brought him into a milieu that includes the Party of Socialism and Liberation and the Workers World Party, both campist organizations that have nothing to do with democratic socialism.

Since West changes his party every few months, one wonders how he now feels running against Kamala Harris, the first Black woman candidate for president, a nominee who has the chance of defeating Donald Trump and saving us from an era of authoritarianism and perhaps from a longer-term turn to fascism. Cornel West was among pro-Palestinian protestors demonstrating at the opening of the Democratic Party National Convention that nominated Harris and running mate Tim Walz. “She and I come out of a long tradition of Black folks from both Jamaica and the United States with Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and Malcolm X who always made the connection between having a moral authority, which means if you have any moral authority, you call a genocide into question,” West told reporters. “If you have any moral authority, you speak to the issues of poverty and wealth inequality in a substantive way and mass incarceration. So, in that sense, I’m just clashing with Sister Harris. I come out of a different corner of the Black (tradition).”

Is West’s Campaign Good for the Left?

One has to ask if West’s campaign will advance the progressive movements that he claims to speak for. His poetical history has been inconsistent, sometimes supporting independent candidates and sometimes Democrats. His campaign has been erratic: first the candidate of the People’s Party, then of the Greens, then an independent, then creating his own Justice Party. His checkered academic career, personal life, and financial problems make one wonder what sort of president he would be, had he half a chance. After reading his narcissistic as-told-to autobiography, some might wonder if he runs principally because he loves the sound of his own voice. As reviewer Scott McLemee wrote, “He is deeply committed to his committed-ness, and passionately passionate about being full of passion.”

And, after all, there is another candidate, Jill Stein of the Green Party, who has practically the same platform as West, including unfortunately the same failure to support Ukraine in its war of self-defense against Russian aggression. And the Green Party’s Stein, a physician, is if less famous, as serious candidate as West. While West may end up appearing on a dozen or perhaps a score of state ballots, Stein and the Green Party, which has state affiliates and decades of experience, will likely be on twice as many. And the problem now is that Stein and West together might take just enough votes away from the Democrats to bring victory to Trump, to Project 2025, and to a period of authoritarianism and reaction.

Black Candidates for President Series:

- **George Edwin Tayler**, candidate of the National Negro Liberty Party 1904 – Not yet posted.
- **Clifton Berry**, of the Socialist Workers Party in 1964
– <https://newpol.org/cornell-west-for-president-part-5-clifton-deberry-the-first-black-candidate-for-president-1964/>
- **Charlene Mitchell** of the Communist Party in 1968
– <https://newpol.org/cornell-west-for-president-part-2-the-black-candidates-of-1968/>
- **Eldridge Cleaver** with the Peace & Freedom Party in 1968
– <https://newpol.org/cornell-west-for-president-part-2-the-black-candidates-of-1968/>
- **Dick Gregory** as a write-in candidate in 1968
– <https://newpol.org/cornell-west-for-president-part-2-the-black-candidates-of-1968/>
- **Channing Emery Phillips** as a Democrat in 1968
– <https://newpol.org/cornell-west-for-president-part-2-the-black-candidates-of-1968/>
- **Shirley Chisholm**, Democrat, in 1972

- <https://newpol.org/cornel-west-for-president-part-3-shirley-chisholm-1972-campaign/>
- **Angela Davis**, Communist Party for vice-president in 1984 and 1988 - <https://newpol.org/angela-davis-for-vice-president-1984-and-1988/>
- **Jesse Jackson**, Democrat, for president in 1984 and 1988
- <https://newpol.org/jesse-jackson-for-president-1984-and-1988/>
- **Ron Daniels**, People's Party candidate in 1992
- <https://newpol.org/cornel-west-for-president-part-7-ron-daniels-for-president-1992/>
- **Cynthia McKinney**, Green Party candidate 2008
- <https://newpol.org/cynthia-mckinney-for-president-2008/>
- **Barack Obama**, Democratic candidate in 2008 and 2012
- <https://newpol.org/barack-obama-for-president-2008-and-2012-no-change-no-hope/>
- **Cornel West, Justice Party**, in 2024 - <https://newpol.org/cornel-west-for-president-in-2024/>
- **Kamala Harris** for vice president in 2020 for president in 2024 - Not yet posted.