

Cornel West, Jill Stein, and the Green Party

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The Green Party persists because it is needed. Hundreds of thousands of progressives vote for Green candidates because they want an alternative to the neoliberal corporate Democrats, not to mention the increasingly neofascist Republicans. On issue after issue—climate, inequality, wars—Green voters find most elected Democrats fight their progressive demands. The Green Party's ranks are constantly replenished by progressives disillusioned and angry at Democratic resistance to progressive policies.

Like the Democratic and Republican parties, the Green Party is memberless. It has no membership in the national party based on agreement with party principles and support with dues. Dues-paying mass membership parties were invented by the left in the 19th century. It is how Green parties around the world are organized. But conforming American political culture where the major parties have not had dues-paying memberships, the members of the U.S. Green Party are its state parties, which have varied organizational forms and membership standards. A growing number of local and state parties have dues-paying memberships, but most are based on party registration in states that keep partisan registrations (31 states and D.C.) or registration with the state party in nonpartisan registration states (19 states).

Without a common membership in the national party, the Green base of support can be estimated by counting registered Greens and Green votes in presidential elections. 255,575 people are registered Green today in 23 states where Green Party ballot qualification permits Green Party registration. That is up over 15,000 from October 2020 and about where the total Green Party registrations have been since 2008.¹ One could estimate from this registration figure covering nearly half of the states that about 500,000 votes identify with the Green Party. Presidential vote totals bear this estimate out. Green presidential candidates received 469,627 votes in 2012 from 37 state ballots, 1,457,216 votes in 2016 from 45 state ballots, and 407,068 votes in 2020 from 30 state ballots. Ballot access was down in 2020 largely due to the Covid lockdown that made petitioning extremely difficult among a public avoiding close contact.

Ideologically, the national Green Party affirms ecosocialism in its national platform. A plank

opposing capitalism and calling for an ecosocialist economy was adopted in 2016 and strengthened in 2022.² Also in 2022, a detailed Ecosocialist Green New Deal plank was adopted.³ Both planks were approved by the National Committee by more than 70%. My presidential campaign with Angela Walker as my vice-presidential running mate won the 2020 nomination on an explicitly ecosocialist platform.⁴ However, most Green Party candidates and issue campaigns push progressive policies without calling for ecosocialist system change. Identification with ecosocialism is strongest among younger party members. The party's formal Youth Caucus of nearly one hundred dues-paying members has called itself the Young Ecosocialists since 2018.

Without membership dues, the Green Party has been too poorly funded at the national level to support organizers to help local and state party organizing or to lead national issue campaigns. The national Green Party relies on appeals for voluntary donations. For these donations it competes with the local and state parties and their candidates for public office. As a consequence, the annual national party revenues have been only in the \$200,000-\$250,000 range for the last decade. That is just enough to support an office manager and a web manager, organizational overhead, and some small contributions to candidates and ballot access drives.

The strength and energy in the Green Party is at the local and state levels in 40 affiliated state parties. Greens show up. They are reliable participants in street politics, from public hearings and issue canvassing to marches and demonstrations. Most of Green electoral action is local. 142 Greens across 19 states currently hold elected office, all of them local.⁵ Greens won 40 of 79 local races they ran in 2023.⁶ Nine Greens have served in state legislatures, five of whom were elected as Green candidates and four of whom switched out of disgust with their Democratic colleagues.⁷

In the 2024 election cycle, state party organizing is on the upswing. Indigenous activists spearheaded the formation of the South Dakota Green Party this year. Their introductory video is in English with Lakota subtitles.⁸ They have collected enough signatures to be on the ballot, which will make 2024 the first time ever that the Green Party presidential ticket will be on the South Dakota ballot. In Arizona, a re-invigorated Green Party that had lost its ballot line in 2018 submitted approximately 63,000 signatures to overcome the onerous ballot access petition barrier of 34,110 signatures that were due by an early deadline of November 30, 2023. Green ballot access petitioning is starting earlier than ever before in this cycle in many states.

Most of this local and state Green Party activity goes under the radar of the mass media as well as progressive and socialist publications. It is when the Green Party runs a presidential candidate that the mass media and publications on the left pay some attention, with most of it describing the Green candidate as a spoiler for the Democratic candidate. The 2024 election cycle has been no different since June 14, 2023, when Cornel West announced he was seeking the Green Party presidential nomination. On October 5, West decided to run as an independent, saying that campaigning in Green primaries and conventions would distract him from speaking directly to the people. So, on November 9, Jill Stein, the Green presidential candidate in 2012 and 2016, announced she would seek the Green nomination.

The media coverage of both has been somewhat different this cycle so far. While the spoiler issue is always included, they are getting coverage of their messages and electoral strategies as well. What seems different this cycle is that Biden and Trump are the most unpopular candidates in history judging from favorable/unfavorable polling. Clinton and Trump in 2016 were barely less unpopular. A difference in 2024 is that both Biden and Trump have been President. It is not surprising that Gallup finds that a record 63% of Americans want a third major party.⁹

Besides West and Stein, several people have announced they are seeking the Green Party presidential nomination but none of them have demonstrated the capacity to build a campaign

organization and raise the funds for a credible presidential campaign. West was the early frontrunner and Stein was his interim campaign manager. Since West announced he was abandoning the Green Party for an independent run, Stein has remained friendly to West. She suggested in an interview soon after announcing her campaign that she would welcome West as her running mate and that in fact she had asked him in 2016 to run with her.¹⁰ Stein thinks that West will be open to a joint ticket once he realizes his ballot access problems. She suggests that as a vice-presidential candidate, he could do what he does best, speaking to the media and public, and not have to worry about the organizational and fundraising side of the campaign. Their joint name recognition and the spirit of unity on the left would generate enthusiasm among progressives and interest by the media. A Stein/West ticket is a real possibility.

As an independent, West will have a much harder time getting on state ballots than he would have as a Green candidate. He is losing the Green Party ballot line that already exists in 20 states, including big states like California, Florida, and Texas where he will have to mount massive petition drives for 219,403, 145,000, and 113,151 qualified signatures respectively. The Greens have a sizable volunteer base experienced in ballot petitioning. With supplementation in the more difficult states by paid petitioners, the Greens should get on the ballot in almost all states, if not all of them. West will have to rely on petition drive management companies that are charging \$10-\$20 per signature.¹¹ It is unlikely that West can raise the millions needed. His first quarterly financial report to the Federal Election Commission showed he had raised \$321,808 in his first three months of his campaign through September 30, with only \$105,407 left on hand. By comparison, the Jill Stein for President account active since 2015 has raised \$169,326 this presidential election cycle, with \$70,402 left on hand. Those funds were raised to deal with legal and FEC reporting issues related to wrapping up her 2016 campaign. Stein opened a Jill Stein for President 2024 campaign account with the FEC on November 9, 2023, but its first quarterly financials will not be reported until the end of 2023. Stein thinks that West would be open to a joint ticket once he faces his ballot access problems.

Most polls have shown both West and Stein receiving 1 percent to 4 percent each, with the lower numbers in battleground states and higher numbers in national polls.¹² Robert Kennedy Jr. is receiving percentages in the teens in most polls, with indications that he is drawing support from across the political spectrum. However, he is losing support from progressives as they learn about and react to Kennedy's policy positions, particularly his anti-vaccine and pro-Israel policies, instead of just his family name.¹³ West and Stein have said the polls showing substantial support for alternatives to Biden and Trump, as well as the 63 percent Gallup poll support for a third major party, indicate that the two-party system is in crisis and that 2024 could be a breakthrough year for an independent progressive.

I am skeptical that the spoiler dilemma progressive voters face when it comes time to vote is much diminished. It is built into our plurality winner elections. The pull of the anti-Trump vote in November 2024 will be powerful. Most progressives will hold their nose and vote for Biden to stop Trump. Given their ages and Trump's legal problems, it is quite possible that one or both of them will not be on the ballot. But the ultra-conservative extremism of any likely Republican nominee is going to push most progressives to vote for any Democrat as the lesser evil.

That electoral reality should not mean the Green Party should stand down in the 2024 presidential election. As part of the long tradition of challenges to the two major parties from their left, the Green Party campaign will put demands into public debate that would otherwise be ignored. From the abolitionist Liberty Party running against slavery in the 1840s, through the Greenback-Labor and People's parties challenging corporate monopolies in the Gilded Era, to the Socialist Party's demands for labor protections and social welfare programs in the Progressive Era, progressive third parties have precipitated many reforms. The Green New Deal for climate action and economic

rights, which was the Green Party's signature issue in the 2010s, was picked up by progressive Democrats and put on the national agenda, albeit in a watered-down form.¹⁴

More practically for the Greens, running a presidential candidate helps with organizing and ballot access. Green Party presidential campaigns bring attention and activity that local and state parties use to draw presidential campaign supporters into their local issue and election campaigns. Securing a ballot line for the next election cycle is affected by the presidential vote in 40 states. The petitioning requirements for a Green candidate to qualify for ballot placement are far easier with a ballot-qualified Green Party than running as an independent.

Both West and Stein are similar on policy, if not on style. Both support strong climate action and anti-poverty measures, Medicare for All, and deep cuts in military spending. West is more expansive in proclaiming his values and broad policies, while Stein spells out her policies in some detail. Stein does not identify as a socialist and presents herself as a progressive campaigning for immediate reforms. West identifies as a Christian socialist, although he cites more biblical than socialist references in his presentations.

Ecosocialists in the Green Party, particularly in the Young Ecosocialists, have expressed concern that much of the socialist content of the platform that Angela Walker and I ran on in 2020 may be neglected in the 2024 campaign. That socialist content included a direct call for a socialist economy based on social ownership and democratic planning. It proposed a National Health Service that would fully socialize and democratize the organization and assets of health care, not just the payment system through National Health Insurance, or Medicare for All. It called for an Ecosocialist Green New Deal that emphasized public ownership and democratic planning in the key industrial sectors, including energy, transportation, and manufacturing, in order to coordinate a complicated transition to 100% clean energy and zero carbon emissions in a rapid timeframe.¹⁵ While Green ecosocialists may be concerned about a de-emphasis on socialist policy content, they are still supporting Stein as the only viable candidate seeking the Green nomination.

Another concern of many Greens with both West and Stein is foreign policy. Both, unlike Biden, call for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to military aid to Israel until it ends its occupation and apartheid. They are clear that both Israelis and Palestinians deserve peace and human rights. But also unlike Biden, both oppose arms to Ukraine for its self-defense and call for a ceasefire and negotiations, as if Russia will cease its aggression if Ukraine is disarmed. When asked about Ukraine, both condemn Russia's invasion, but then claim that Russia was provoked by NATO expansion. They provide a geopolitical analysis of state interests that highlights U.S. imperialism without a class analysis of the oppressed and oppressor in Ukraine that gears their policy to support the oppressed.

I have debated Stein on Ukraine.¹⁶ I have also privately debated West on Ukraine, which led to a policy briefing for West that I set up in early August with the Ukrainian socialist political scientist Denys Pilash. Pilash presented the view of the Ukrainian left who are appealing for solidarity from Western leftists in their struggles against both Western banks and Russian tanks. They ask for campaigns to cancel Ukraine's enormous Western debt burden as well as to provide the arms Ukraine needs for its self-defense. West stayed on the call for two hours, half an hour past another appointment he had. He seemed persuaded by Pilash's analysis of both Russian and Western imperialism and suggested we do a public conversation with Pilash on Ukraine. But he never confirmed a date for that event. In subsequent media interviews, West has reverted to his geopolitical analysis and call for a ceasefire and negotiations.

Ukraine policy has divided the Green Party as it has the broader left.¹⁷ The dilemma for socialist internationalists who oppose colonial occupation in both Ukraine and Palestine is whether to support Stein or West who do not support Ukrainian resistance to Russian occupation or to support Biden

who does not support Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. Looming in the background of this decision is Donald Trump, who could not care less about either Ukrainians or Palestinians.

When West was a Green Party candidate, I shared my thoughts with him on campaign organization, platform policies, and messaging based on my experience as the 2020 Green presidential candidate. I have been doing the same with Stein since West left the Green Party and she announced her candidacy. One suggestion I gave to both of them is how to address the spoiler problem, which comes up in every media and public appearance. Both agree with a ranked choice national popular vote for President, which would eliminate the spoiler problem. I hope their campaigns will go on the offensive and turn the spoiler problem around by demanding that Biden join them in supporting that reform. If he doesn't, he should be blamed for the spoiler problem.

I share the concern of many progressives that Green votes might contribute to a Trump victory. I think that risk is small. Most Green votes are simply Green votes, not wayward Democratic votes. The 2016 exit poll asked what third-party voters would have done if their candidate had not been on the ballot. 61 percent of Stein voters would have not voted, with 25 percent voting for Clinton and 14 percent for Trump.¹⁸ If those numbers are plugged into the three closest states in 2016—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—Trump still wins. In the competitive battleground states in 2024, which most pollsters and political scientists put at four to seven states, the pressure for lesser evil voting will be intense. But in the other non-competitive 44 to 47 states with over 80 percent of the electorate, the Green alternative should be part of the debate.

My conclusion is that the small risk of Trump is worth having a credible independent progressive voice in this race instead of silencing ourselves and abandoning our demands. Stein will bring out the hundreds of thousands of partisan Green voters who will not vote for a Democrat or Republican and perhaps many more, such as the many Arab, Muslim, and young voters who are angry at who they call "Genocide Joe" over Gaza.

Notes

1. "Voter Registration Totals," *Ballot Access News*, Dec. 2023.
2. Green Party of the United States, Ecosocialist Economy plank.
3. Green Party of the United States, Ecosocialist Green New Deal plank.
4. Howie Hawkins Presidential Campaign.
5. Green Party of the United States, GPUS Elections Data.
6. Green Party of the United States, "Election Report - November 7, 2023 Elections."
7. Green Party of the United States, "Greens in State Legislatures."
8. Green Party of the United States, "Vote Green. Vote for the Future."
9. Jeffery M. Jones, "Support for Third U.S. Political Party Up to 63%," *Gallup News*, Oct. 4, 2023.
10. Sabby Sabs, "Jill Stein interview: I was not planning to run," Nov. 13, 2023.
11. "Petition drive management companies," *Ballotpedia*.
12. FiveThirtyEight, Latest Polls.

13. Hanna Trudo, "RFK Jr. lurches right with independent 2024 bid," *The Hill*, Oct. 25, 2023.
14. Press Release, "Green Party Urges AOC to Embrace its Initial Green New Deal Proposal from 2010," May 1, 2023.
15. Hawkins/Walker policy platform. West policy platform. Stein's policy principles. Stein's more detailed policy platform was still forthcoming at the time of this writing.
16. Green Party of Alameda County, "Green Sunday—A Conversation About Ukraine & Peace, with Jill Stein & Howie Hawkins," Apr. 9, 2023.
17. Howie Hawkins, "The Green Party Debates Ukraine," *Against the Current*, July/Aug. 2023.
18. Stanley Feldman and Melissa Herrmann, "Exit Polls: How Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency," *CBS News*, Nov. 9, 2016.