

September 2, 2024

GOP network aids 3rd party h

The plan is to siphon off votes from Harris.

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and DAN MERICA
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Italo Medelius was leading a volunteer drive to put Cornel West on North Carolina's presidential ballot last spring when he received an unexpected call from a man named Paul who said he wanted to help.

Though Medelius, co-chairman of West's "Justice for All Party," welcomed the assistance, the offer would complicate his life, provoking threats and drawing him into a state election board investigation of the motivations, backgrounds and suspect tactics of his new allies. His is not an isolated case.

Across the country, a network of Republican political operatives, lawyers and their allies is trying to shape November's election in ways that favor former President Donald Trump. Their goal is to prop up third-party candidates such as West who offer liberal voters an alternative that could siphon support from Democratic nominee Kamala Harris.

It is not clear who is paying for the effort, but it could affect states that were decided by minuscule margins in the 2020 election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

This is money West's campaign does not have, and he has encouraged the effort. Last month, the academic said in an interview that "American politics is highly gangster-like activity" and he "just wanted to get on that ballot."

Trump has offered praise for West, calling him "one of my favorite candidates." Another is Green Party candidate Jill Stein. Trump favors both for the same reason. "I like her very much. You know why? She takes 100% from them. He takes 100%."

Democrats are exploring ways to lift Randall Terry, an anti-abortion presidential candidate for the Constitution Party, believing he could draw

votes from Trump.

But the GOP effort appears to be more far-reaching. After years of Trump accusing Democrats of "rigging" elections, it is his allies who are now mounting a sprawling and at times deceptive campaign to tilt the vote in his favor.

"The fact that either of the two major parties would attempt financially and otherwise to support a third-party spoiler candidate as part of its effort to win is an unfortunate byproduct" of current election laws "that facilitate spoilers," said Edward B. Foley, a law professor who leads Ohio State University's election law program. "This phenomenon is equally problematic whichever of the two major party engages in it."

One key figure in the push is Paul Hamrick, the man on the other end of the call with Medelius in North Carolina.

Hamrick serves as counsel for the Virginia-based nonprofit People Over Party, which has pushed to get West on the ballot in Arizona, Maine, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and Virginia, as well as North Carolina, records show.

In an interview, Hamrick declined to say who else besides him was orchestrating the effort, and he would not divulge who was funding it. He vigorously disputed any suggestion that he was a Republican, but acknowledged that he was not a Democrat, either.

His history is complex. Hamrick was chief of staff to former Alabama Gov. Don Siegelman, a one-term Democrat who was booted from office in 2003 and later was convicted and sentenced to prison on federal bribery, conspiracy and mail fraud charges. Hamrick was charged alongside his former boss in two separate cases. One was dismissed; he was acquitted in the other.

Though he insists he's not a Republican, Hamrick voted in Alabama's GOP primary in 2002, 2006 and 2010, according to state voting records. He was tapped briefly in 2011 to work for the Alabama state Senate's GOP majority. And since 2015,



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Progressive activist Cornel West has encouraged help from a GOP network trying to get Donald Trump re-elected. Above, West speaks at a demonstration outside the Democratic convention on Aug. 21.

according to federal campaign finance disclosures, he has contributed only to GOP causes, including \$2,500 to the Alabama Republican Party and \$3,300 to Georgia Rep. Mike Collins, a Republican who has trafficked in conspiracy theories.

Hamrick denied that he voted in any GOP primaries, suggesting that the voting data was inaccurate. For years, he was a consultant for Matrix LLC, an Alabama firm known for its hardball approach. Matrix LLC was part of an effort in Florida to run "ghost candidates" against elected officials who had raised the ire of executives for Florida Power & Light, the state's largest utility.

Daniella Levine Cava, current mayor of Miami-Dade County, was a target. As a county commissioner, Levine Cava had fought with the utility. When she ran for re-election in 2018, Matrix covertly financed a third-party candidate they hoped would siphon enough votes to tip her seat to a GOP challenger, The

Miami Herald reported in 2022.

Hamrick was deeply involved. A company he created paid the spoiler candidate a \$60,000 salary and rented a \$2,300-a-month home for him, according to the Herald and business filings made in Alabama. Hamrick said the candidate worked for him to help recruit business. Hamrick denied having anything to do with the man's campaign.

Either way, it did not work. Levine Cava was re-elected before winning the mayor's seat in 2020.

Now Hamrick is playing a prominent role to place West's name on the ballot in competitive states. Hamrick surfaced in Arizona two weeks ago after a woman told the AP that a document was fraudulently submitted in her name to Arizona's secretary of state in which she purportedly agreed to serve as an elector for West. She said her signature was forged and she never agreed to be an elector.

After the AP publication, Hamrick said to the woman's husband to rectify the situation. "I declined to say what information was shared. He to persuade another who backed out to re-elect West, according to text and voicemails.

The next day, with line to qualify for the ballot just hours away, Johnson, a prominent lawyer, and Ama, a former GOP state made house visits they tried to persuade sign new paperwork West electors.

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Work aids 3rd party hopefuls



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Progressive activist Cornel West has encouraged help from a GOP network trying to get Donald Trump re-elected. Above, West speaks at a demonstration outside the Democratic convention on Aug. 21 in Chicago.

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After the AP published her account, Hamrick said he spoke to the woman's husband, trying to rectify the situation and "gave some information." Hamrick declined to say what information was shared. He also tried to persuade another elector who backed out to recommit to West, according to interviews and voicemails.

The next day, with the deadline to qualify for the Arizona ballot just hours away, Brett Johnson, a prominent Republican lawyer, and Amanda Reeve, a former GOP state lawmaker, made house visits to each as they tried to persuade both to sign new paperwork to serve as West electors.

Johnson and Reeve work for Snell & Wilmer, which has done \$257,000 worth of business for the Republican National Committee over the past two years, campaign finance disclosures show.

Hamrick declined to comment on the role of Johnson and Reeve. They did not respond to

requests for comment.

West did not qualify for the Arizona ballot.

Other GOP-aligned law firms also have been involved in the national push, opposing Democrat-backed challenges to West's placement on the ballot:

- In Georgia, Bryan Tyson, a partner at the Election Law Group, represented the state Republican Party as it tried to keep West on the ballot. The firm has collected \$60,000 in payments from the RNC since April, campaign finance records show.

- On Thursday, Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger overruled an administrative law judge and placed West, Stein and Party for Socialism and Liberation nominee Claudia De la Cruz on the ballot.

- In North Carolina, Phil Strach, a member of the Republican National Lawyers Association, successfully challenged in court a North Carolina State Board of Elections decision to bar West from the ballot.

- In Michigan, John Bursch, a senior lawyer for the Alliance Defending Freedom, the conservative legal group that helped overturn *Roe v. Wade*, successfully fended off a challenge to West's placement on the ballot. Bursch's firm, Bursch Law PLLC, was paid \$25,000 by Trump's campaign in November 2020 for "RECOUNT: LEGAL CONSULTING," according to campaign finance disclosures.

- In Pennsylvania, a lawyer with long-standing ties to GOP candidates and causes, unsuccessfully argued in August for West to stay on the ballot. The attorney, Matt Haverstick, declined to say in an interview who hired him or why. People Over Party, the group Hamrick is affiliated with, had tried to get West on the ballot.

None of these actions was funded by West's campaign, though he and his "Justice for All Party" have coordinated at times with Hamrick's People Over Party, according to legal filings, a news release and social media posts. Tyson, Strach, and Bursch all did not respond to a request for comment.