

**MEMPHIS-MIDSOUTH
DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA**



VOTER GUIDE
★ ★ ★ 2026 ★ ★ ★

**OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE
SHELBY COUNTY NOVEMBER 3
MIDTERM ELECTION**

Originally Published October 13, 2026, by the
Voter Guide Subcommittee of the Electoral & Policy Committee of the
Memphis-Midsouth Democratic Socialists of America

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FOREWORD

General election season is here again. It's the 2026 midterms, and across the country, the prognosticators and experts are predicting a reckoning for the Trump regime and the MAGA Republicans.

It sounds nice.

But in Memphis and in Tennessee – the “blue wave” has a high wall to clear before it gets our feet wet.

Looking back to the beginning of this year and the start of midterm election campaign season, it would have been almost impossible to predict the landscape of the current moment:

- The 5th, 8th, and 9th House districts were hastily redrawn in an attempt to break the power of working class Black voters in Memphis and Shelby County. After protesting the warp-speed effort to implement gerrymandering after *Callais v. Louisiana*, Democrat lawmakers in the TN General Assembly have *all* been stripped of their committee assignments.
- Long-time House Representative Steve Cohen is facing the music and retiring at the end of his term - possibly to be replaced by a Trump-endorsed GOP firebrand.
- A sustained military conflict in Iran - the dream of both Democrat and Republican administrations for nearly 50 years - has finally been unleashed by Donald Trump and the Hegseth-helmed Department of War, triggering an energy crisis and exacerbating inflation and cost-of-living issues for working Americans at levels not seen in decades.
- The Memphis Safe Task Force is still active on our streets and actually intensifying in its mission of abducting undocumented Memphians. Four Black men - Darrin Pigram, Jonah Neal, Tyrin Johnson, and Alfonso Ivy - were killed by law enforcement officers during Task Force operations between May 13 and July 8. By voting time in 2026, the Memphis City Council, the Shelby County Commission, Memphis Mayor Paul Young, and Shelby County Mayor Mickell Lowery have still not passed resolutions condemning the Task Force or formally asked for its conclusion.
- While the grassroots groundswell against the development of data centers in American cities has been a signature political throughline of 2026, Memphians and our neighbors in Mississippi are getting more of them. Two new data center facilities have been announced this year, bringing the total to 5 active data centers in southwest Memphis and Southaven, MS. Permits for more data centers are pending. The wastewater recycling facility that was promised at the outset of xAI's foray into the Mid-South is not under active construction. This summer, Memphis and the tri-county area was under an Air Quality Alert nearly every day for excessive ozone levels - a signature pollutant of data centers. On October 6, The Memphis City Council voted to postpone a moratorium on new data centers, triggering a public outcry in the council chambers that resulted in the meeting being recessed and City Council members being whisked away for their safety. There is still no moratorium on data centers in Memphis or Shelby County. In June, SpaceX - now the parent company of xAI - held an IPO on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange. Its majority shareholder, Elon Musk, is now the world's first and only trillionaire.

In short - this has unquestionably been a year of things getting worse, instead of getting better.

But far from allowing these attacks and failures to dishearten us, the moment calls on all of us - including you! – to recommit ourselves to the struggle to make this world and Memphis a better place.

Because in this midterm election, there are two notable points of light. **Among the recommendations you'll find in this edition of our Voter Guide, we have a couple of races that should give everyone a reason to get to the polls this November.**

The first is the campaign of Tennessee State Representative Justin J. Pearson for the US House of Representatives in TN-09. It would be enough that someone is competing in this race against current Tennessee State Senator Brent Taylor, a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary clown, complete with a Trump endorsement and MAGA voting history. It would also be enough that someone is fighting as hard as Pearson is to retain the seat for the Democratic caucus in the face of the extraordinary and brazen gerrymandering committed by the Tennessee General Assembly this May.

What's truly special about Pearson's campaign is its tone and substance. In a Southern political campaign where the goalposts were moved to heavily favor Republicans, establishment Democratic strategy would be telling Pearson to run to the center. They would say that he should water down his demands, speak less confrontationally on the stump, and merely try to ride the current of backlash against Trump's party.

Instead, Pearson has doubled down on a style of class-struggle electoral politics that has never been seen before in Memphis on this scale. Many of his proposed policies (a \$25 national minimum wage, a federal jobs guarantee, and Medicare For All) triangulate him as more progressive than almost any other Democratic politician in the South. It's easy to see why so many people have called him and his candidacy "once in a generation" - and this is, perhaps, our only quibble here at Memphis-Midsouth DSA.

It is our sincere hope – and our mission – that Pearson will merely be the first in a generation of political leaders coming from Memphis who are grounded in organizing the working class and who will speak loudly and clearly for change that materially empowers the people of this community.

The other meaningful highlight of this election is a confusing bit of text on the ballot labeled "City of Memphis Charter Referendum Ordinance No. 5966". There is no summary or blurb on this referendum to clue you in on what this is really about - and in all likelihood, that is by design. But the main thing this ordinance would do is *remove* a certain group of people from the list of city employees exempted from civil service status - the workers of the Memphis public libraries.

The struggle to remove “appointee” status and to gain civil service status and protections for public library workers has been a signature chapter-wide effort by Memphis-Midsouth DSA for more than a year now. Our members have shown up to City Council meetings, knocked thousands of doors during canvasses, collaborated with local labor leaders and political figures (including Justin J. Pearson!) and otherwise materially contributed in the form of labor and individual donations to support this ballot measure.

All this is to say - we’re a little bit biased about 5966. But that’s because a vote for 5966 is not a vote for a politician who will one day betray or disappoint you. **This referendum is an unambiguously good and effective step to directly empower members of the multiracial working class.** With the push of a button, we can all restore basic fairness and rights to library workers in perpetuity, strengthening and protecting a class of public servants who perform some of the most necessary and important front-line social work in our communities.

***Should it pass, Referendum 5966 will represent one of the greatest victories for public sector workers in the South in the twenty-first century.
And to us, that seems like something worth voting for. How about you?***

Never forget - because of meddling from the GOP and their attempts to engineer victories that rely on low voter turnout, **political power is very much up for grabs in Memphis and in the state of Tennessee.** It is sitting there, waiting for the working class to organize - to become coordinated enough to move collectively and strategically - so that they can grasp it.

The Electoral & Policy Committee of the Memphis-Midsouth chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America was formed to accomplish this task. Our Voter Guide subcommittee created this guide to help the working class and the left-leaning members of the electorate make the best decisions possible at the polling place. We hope you find it a useful tool to educate yourself and make your vote count.

WHAT DOES THIS VOTER GUIDE COVER?

This voter guide is for the election on **Tuesday, November 3, 2026.**

Early voting begins Wednesday, October 14, 2026, and ends on Saturday, October 29, 2026

This Voter Guide is for the General Election in the following races:

- US Senate
- US House of Representatives
- Governor
- Tennessee Senate
- Tennessee House of Representatives
- Tennessee State Constitutional Amendments 1, 2, and 3
- Town of Collierville School Board
- City of Millington School Board
- City of Memphis Charter Referendum 5966, 5977, and 5978

HOW DID WE MAKE THIS VOTER GUIDE?

Our Voter Guide is the result of hundreds of hours of work by a group of dedicated volunteers within the Voter Guide Subcommittee of the Electoral & Policy Committee (EPC) of the Memphis-Midsouth chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (MMDSA). We are organizers whose theory of change is based on strategically organizing around a credible plan to win meaningful power for the working class and the cause of democratic socialism. **In other words – do you like Bernie Sanders and Zohran Mamdani? We want to do that here in Memphis – and in Tennessee, more broadly.**

We are working people with jobs, families, and life obligations, so we tried to do our best by researching online. We looked at candidate websites, news sources, social media accounts, court records, voting records - you name it! We also conducted research by attending candidate forums whenever possible so we could see these people up close and in-person, and we also reached out to our allies in the various corners of the political scene to learn from them.

As much as possible, we base our research and decisions on public statements and extemporaneous answers to questions asked in public. As a matter of course, we do not issue questionnaires for candidates, and we do not conduct private interviews with candidates except in rare instances where special interest warrants it. We conducted private interviews for only one race in this Voter Guide – the TN House District 96 race between Gabby Salinas and Dr. Telisa Franklin. This is because we place a high value on a candidate's ability to communicate directly and honestly about their support for the working class in the public forum. We are not interested in being pandered to in private or in reading some AI-generated bullshit that someone sends us in an email.

Each candidate was researched as thoroughly as we could manage, and that information was compiled into a central place. From there, the compiled information was reviewed by the EPC, and then the choice of whether or not to make a recommendation was deliberated upon as a committee and then put up to a vote by the EPC, requiring a substantial quorum of overall MMDSA members in good standing. **It was truly a collaborative effort from start to finish.**

WHAT DOES SOMEONE HAVE TO DO TO GET RECOMMENDED?

We issued recommendations based on a variety of factors. We researched candidate positions about issues that matter to us, including:

- Opposition to the ongoing federal occupation of Memphis
- Opposition to xAI and Elon Musk's ongoing crime of polluting our city and the exploitation of our water supply

- Opposition to the overreach of the state government in affairs of home rule in Memphis, especially the state takeover of Memphis-Shelby County Schools.
- Unwavering support for the public school system as a cornerstone of necessary public services deserving of full funding, and opposition to the expansion of charter schools and the state voucher scheme
- Criticism and solutions for the current conditions at 201 Poplar and the deaths of inmates in custody there, as well as the for-profit carceral state in general
- Support for marginalized communities in Memphis and Tennessee, especially people of color, LGBTQIA+ folks, and people without documentation
- Support for Medicare, TennCare, and access to free healthcare
- Support for labor unions and the rights of workers to organize and form unions, including opposition to right-to-work legislation and opposition to the dismantling of PECCA for public school teachers
- The candidate's legislative history, where applicable
- Any endorsements the candidate had received
- All financial or in-kind contributions to the campaign. We strongly prefer candidates who are funded by small donors, and we are wary of candidates who are funded by corporate PACs

MMDSA will never recommend a candidate who has received any contribution whatsoever from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or similar pro-war, pro-genocide organizations.

And this is just the start. We tried to consider the candidate and their campaign as a whole - how do they conduct themselves, how do they interact with other candidates, how well and how consistently do they represent their policies and beliefs?

In most cases, the candidates we recommend here don't conform to all the issues outlined above, so don't take our recommendation as meaning that *all* of the candidates we highlighted are bound to *all* of these positions. **We are not here to speak for the candidates - they speak for themselves.** We are here to champion the cause of the working class of Memphis and Shelby County, and our recommendations went to the candidates who went on the record with the correct position on one or more of these issues, combined with their campaign being pro-working class (as far as we could determine).

WHAT DOES OUR RECOMMENDATION MEAN?

One important thing that we need to address right off the bat - ***these recommendations are NOT endorsements.*** We do not consent to any usage of our organization's name, logos, or any other identifying marks to suggest we have endorsed any of these candidates. Currently, MMDSA has not made any endorsements in this election. We have a very explicit process for candidate endorsement on our website - [check it out if you'd like to learn more!](#)

The main difference between a recommendation and an endorsement here is simple. For us, an endorsement means we are throwing our entire support and energy into a candidate who embodies our ideals and who will be a champion for the cause of democratic socialism in Memphis, Shelby County, and West Tennessee. Because of the high level of commitment that an endorsement entails, it's an incredibly deliberative process that no one met the bar for this cycle.

On the other hand, a recommendation is just that - "a suggestion or proposal as to the best course of action, especially one put forward by an authoritative body," if you want a dictionary definition. Our recommendation represents what we believe is the best choice given the range of candidates available. In some cases, we recommend candidates who we wholeheartedly support but don't meet our extremely high bar for endorsement. In other cases, it's best to think of our recommendation as a straightforward expression of harm reduction; candidates with whom we have some disagreement, but clearly hold pro-working class values and are miles better than their opponents. **The members of Electoral and Policy Committee viewed it as a basic requirement of this project that we not use our voice and platform to recommend subpar candidates in this guide. In other words, we chose to reject the "lesser of two evils" trap that voters so often find themselves locked within.** If you see a recommendation here, it means that this is not just someone who we find the least offensive, but it's someone who either actually deserves your vote or who needs to win against someone truly awful.

In addition, in this general election guide, we have written short statements on all contested elections to allow voters to make decisions with regards to how their vote can strategically build working class power. While we did not make recommendations in these races (and may in fact have major disagreements with any or all candidates in them), in almost every instance the facts point to a clear choice for working people one way or the other.

Finally (and unfortunately), in many races in the general election, we simply don't have anything to say that would be helpful to voters. Many seats are uncontested; due to intense gerrymandering, they are safely Democrat or Republican, and unfortunately, safe seats often make safe havens for the kind of bad politics we simply can't support. These races will simply be marked "No Recommendation," along with races where there is no major-party candidate. We have no guidance for how you should vote in these elections and feel that actions such as voting third party or write-in are reasonable options.

WHAT DO THESE POSITIONS DO?

Each elected politician takes a pledge attesting that they will faithfully, truthfully, and diligently carry out the responsibilities of each position ***according to the will of the people that voted for them.***

US SENATE

Each state elects two senators to represent them in the United States, meaning that representation in this body is not proportional to population size - Wyoming and California each have the same number of US senators. Because of this, the Senate is described as a legislative body that encourages cross-party collaboration and tempering the partisanship of the House of Representatives. In reality, the Senate allows rural states with lower populations to overrule the will of the vast majority of the country. Issues like raising the minimum wage and requiring background checks on all firearms sales and transfers have passed in the House, only to die in the Senate. In the current era, senators from Republican-held states like Tennessee represent some of the most intractable obstacles to the improvement of the lives of working-class people and the furthering of democratic power in the United States.

US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The House of Representatives is responsible for drafting, modifying, and approving federal legislation that then goes on to the US Senate for voting approval. A legislative bill must be passed by both the House and Senate in identical form and then be signed by the President to become law. The number of seats each state has in the House is based on the population of each state (according to US Census data) and the boundaries of the districts are determined by the states themselves. In almost every case, states draw the boundaries of these House districts to favor a certain political party - not to give equal or proportional representation to the people living in the area or to preserve political boundaries like cities or metro areas. This process is called “gerrymandering.”

Historically, in places like Tennessee and across the Deep South, gerrymandering has been an extension of racist practices, and federal legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was put into place to combat this. In May of 2026, the US Supreme Court struck down this part of the Voting Rights Act in *Callais v. Louisiana*. In response, the Tennessee General Assembly (which had just recessed for the term) reconvened in a special session to pass new gerrymandered boundaries for the 5th, 8th, and 9th House districts in an attempt to dilute the voting power of working-class Black voters in Memphis before the 2026 midterm elections. These new districts favor Republicans.

Because of this blatantly racially motivated gerrymandering, many Memphians who are used to voting in the 9th district may be unaware of which district they now reside in. You can view the updated district maps [here](#) if you are unsure of your current district.

GOVERNOR

The Tennessee Governor holds the state's executive power, commands the National Guard, chairs a variety of state authorities, and holds enactment power over legislation. This role is held by Republican Bill Lee. Lee finishes his last term this year. In the post-Tea Party era, the governor of Tennessee has largely been a surprisingly weak position. Bill Lee and Bill Haslam before him have largely been facilitators of the GOP-led agenda in the Tennessee General Assembly, where Republicans have held a supermajority in both chambers since 2010. Increasingly, the Tennessee governor has also largely been a facilitator of the wishes of the Trump regime in Washington.

TENNESSEE SENATE

There are 33 seats in the [Tennessee Senate](#), representing the state's 33 districts. Similar to the US Senate, this body of government is responsible for approving bills proposed by the Tennessee House of Representatives to be sent to the governor for approval and signature (enactment). Functioning as a higher legislative body than the TN House, state senators are essentially the same as state representatives, except they represent far larger districts. Tennessee state senators are elected to a four-year term. You can find out your current Tennessee state senator [here](#).

TENNESSEE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Together with the Tennessee Senate, the [Tennessee House of Representatives](#) comprises the legislative body for the state, sending bills to the Governor. You can find out your current Tennessee Representative [here](#).

There are 99 seats in the Tennessee House of Representatives, and all 99 positions are up for election.

TOWN OF COLLIERVILLE SCHOOL BOARD

Local school board members are responsible for overseeing school operations within Collierville Schools, separate from Memphis-Shelby County Schools. There are five school board positions, and candidates are elected to a four-year term.

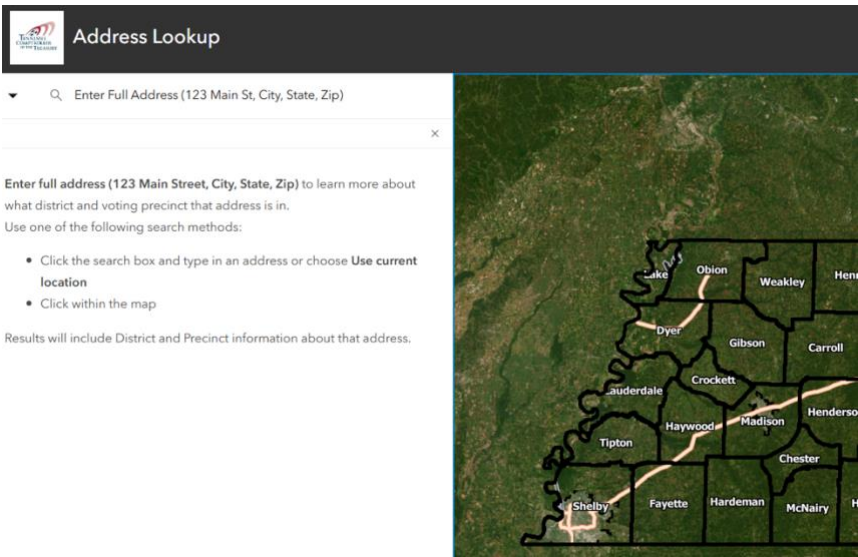
CITY OF MILLINGTON SCHOOL BOARD

Members of the Millington Municipal Schools school board govern the Millington Municipal Schools district, separate from Memphis-Shelby County Schools. There are seven school board positions, and candidates are elected to a four-year term.

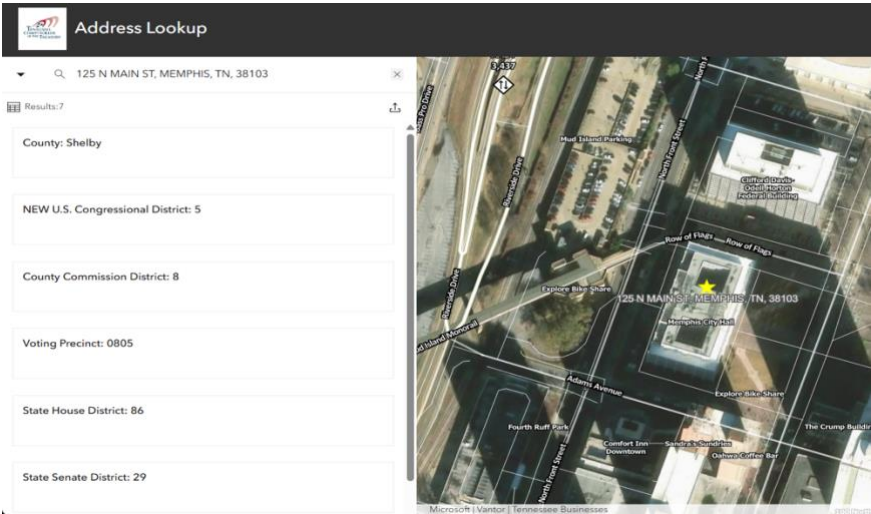
HOW TO FIND YOUR DISTRICT

APPROACH 1 - VIA THE TENNESSEE COMPTROLLER:

1. Enter your address [here](#)

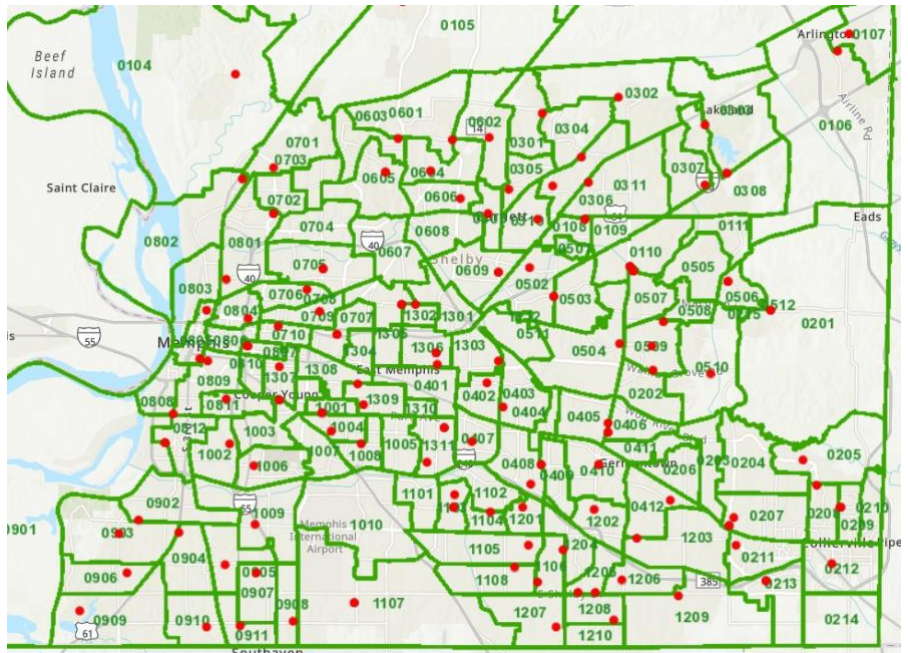


2. The webpage will then list your congressional district, county district, state house district, state senate district, and voting precinct



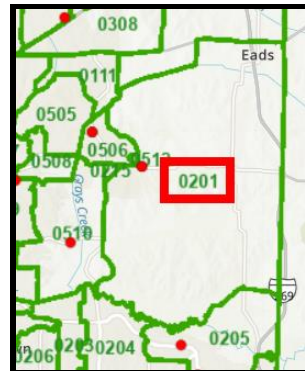
APPROACH 2 – VIA THE SHELBY COUNTY GOVERNMENT:

1. Enter your address [here](#)



2. A four-digit number will cover the area you live in:

- The first two numbers are your district number (02)
- The second two numbers are your precinct number (01)
→ Precincts make up a district



US SENATE - Marquita Bradshaw

Candidates

Marquita Bradshaw (D)

Bill Hagerty (R)

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Marquita Bradshaw.** Bradshaw's activism surrounding those affected by the Memphis Defense Depot and other instances of environmental racism led multiple Memphis-Midsouth DSA members to sign her petition to run for Senate when she first ran for office in 2020. She has proven to be an outspoken and powerful environmental justice advocate and political force, shocking the state Democratic Party in 2020 in a primary upset through a combination of savvy organizing and engaging with activist communities across the state. Her historic 2020 campaign for US Senate was endorsed by all 5 Tennessee DSA chapters, as well as the national DSA organization, and in 2026 her progressive platform and organizing experience are more than suited to take on Bill Hagerty and the GOP.

US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

District TN-05

Candidates

Chaz Molder (D)

Charlie Hatcher (R)

Comments: Columbia Mayor Chaz Molder is facing off against former TN Agriculture Commissioner Charlie Hatcher for the redrawn US House 5 district, which stretches from Westwood in Memphis, up to the northwest suburbs of Clarksville on the Kentucky border some 200 miles away, then back down to Columbia and the Nashville suburbs. Molder represents the business/centrist wing of the Democratic party (with a corporate-approved focus on “affordability” and “access to healthcare” instead of concrete progressive policies) but is staunchly opposed to the Trump administration’s abuses of power. Molder has also publicly supported a data center moratorium but unfortunately remains silent concerning a moratorium on weapons sales to the state of Israel.

Charlie Hatcher won the Republican primary in what many view as an upset, defeating the Trump-endorsed incumbent Andy Ogles. The actual difference between Hatcher and conservative media fixture Ogles is slim, however: Hatcher immediately gained Trump’s endorsement in the general election, and he represents a rubber stamp for the broader MAGA agenda. This includes continued support to ICE, the Iran War, and being pro-gun by “opposing efforts by Washington to create unnecessary restrictions on responsible gun ownership”.

District TN-08

Candidates

Heidi Kuhn (D)

David Kustoff (R)

Comments: Shelby County Criminal Court Clerk Heidi Kuhn is facing off against GOP incumbent David Kustoff in the newly redrawn US House 8 district, and moderate Democrat Kuhn's efforts at criminal justice reform stand in stark contrast to the pro-ICE, pro-IDF Kustoff, who has championed the Memphis Safe Task Force and the brutal overreach of federal agents in our communities at the same time as he has cheered on genocide in Gaza and attacks on Iran.

District TN-09 – Justin J. Pearson

Candidates

Justin J. Pearson (D)

Brent Taylor (R)

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Justin J. Pearson.** Our chapter members have supported Justin Pearson since his campaign to stop the Byhalia Pipeline from polluting Boxtown and threatening the aquifer that provides the city with clean water, and throughout his still-fledgling political career he has clearly and consistently stood with the working families of Memphis.

Pearson has been at the forefront of nearly every fight the progressive movement has taken on in Tennessee. From being expelled from his seat in the state house protesting inaction on gun violence to his denunciation of the Gaza genocide, from his refusal of corporate money to his unwavering support of the labor movement, from his demands for justice for immigrants in the face of ICE raids to his deep belief in old-school American democracy, he is providing a principled example that many other organizers in the South (and beyond) are aspiring to. His policy platform is bold: a \$25 minimum wage, Medicare For All, abolish ICE, end war, revoke all aid to the IDF, Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination, unions in every workplace, green energy and real steps towards fighting the climate crisis.

He primaried long-time incumbent Steve Cohen against the advice of the entire Memphis political class, because he knew that Memphis could not afford to wait four years, or eight, or ten or twenty for these policies to come into being, and when the TN State House voted to redraw the congressional map and gerrymander the district for a crony of Donald Trump, Justin Pearson doubled down and built a multiracial working class coalition. His campaign has reached corners of the state previously thought unwinnable, and his ability to bring out crowds of hundreds or even thousands in places like Pulaski, TN (the literal birthplace of the KKK) has led to him polling within the margin of error in a race that was never even supposed to be competitive.

We are not alone in recognizing Pearson's strengths; he has garnered endorsements from politicians like Ro Khanna of California, Chris Rabb of Pennsylvania, Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, as well as a multitude of organizations like Indivisible Memphis (as well as the national Indivisible organization) and Track AIPAC.

Of all the recommended candidates in the guide, Pearson remains our easiest "yes."

GOVERNOR

Candidates

Jerri Green (D)

Marsha Blackburn (R)

Comments: The overwhelming winner in August's Democratic primary, Jerri Green is a suburban Memphis City Council member whose surprisingly progressive agenda marks a break from previous Democratic gubernatorial candidates. It also marks a change from her voting record on the Memphis City Council, which has been decidedly more moderate.

Her opponent, the arch-MAGA Marsha Blackburn, appears focused on anti-Chinese rhetoric, increasing violence (at home and abroad), possible campaign finance violations, and defending Donald Trump from any form of accountability.

A wild card comes in the form of two independent candidates that could prove to be spoilers: the conservative anti-MAGA David Hatley (whose anti-corruption platform is drawing so much attention Marsha Blackburn is running attack ads against him) and pro-life moderate Lauren Pinkston.

TENNESSEE STATE SENATE

District 29

Candidates

Raumesh Akbari (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 31

Candidates

David Weatherspoon (D)

Brent Taylor (R)

Comments: David Weatherspoon is a moderate Democrat and longtime fixture at local Democratic Party clubs. A well-liked hospital chaplain, he was recruited to run in this suburban district due to his previous attempt to win the seat in 2018. Weatherspoon’s campaign focus on civility and “neighborliness” stands in stark contrast to Brent Taylor, the inflammatory GOP incumbent and Trump crony who helped lead the charge earlier this year to redistrict Memphis and gerrymander Black voters out of representation.

District 33

Candidate

London Lamar (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

TENNESSEE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

District 83 – Margaret Price

Candidates

Margaret Price (D)

Mark White (R)

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Margaret Price** First-time candidate and experienced progressive campaign staffer Margaret Price is taking on the challenge of flipping a supposedly safe GOP district. We are excited by Price's campaign and her detailed platform that is centered on a pro-labor, pro-family agenda. She explicitly calls for greater local control and autonomy for municipalities; given how the GOP-controlled TN State House has time and again pre-empted local governments from passing progressive legislation, this is an important issue. Especially important is the need for her to prevail over her opponent, incumbent Mark White. As the chairman of the House Education Committee, White has been the prime architect of the state takeover of the Shelby County school board.

District 84

Comments: After winning both the primary for TN House 84 and the general election for Shelby County Criminal Court Clerk in August, Rep. Joe Towns Jr. decided to drop out of the race for his current TN House seat to take the Criminal Court Clerk position. While not terribly common, occasionally political parties will need to replace a nominee for a particular elected office, and state law defers fairly broadly to the party-in-question's bylaws to determine the process a party will use to replace a candidate.

With this in mind, the Tennessee Democratic Party and the Shelby County Democratic Party entered into a process **not** clearly defined by their publicly available bylaws, and the upshot of the whole thing was that the nominee for TN House 84 (and the next state rep for the district, as no Republican qualified) was decided by exactly one person: Shelby County Democratic Party executive committee member Coleman Thompson. Thompson, whose position is not elected by the general public, chose former Shelby County Commissioner Matthew Szalaj, who worked as a special assistant to Mayor Paul Young during the undisclosed xAI negotiations to build the Colossus datacenter in South Memphis. Szalaj was chosen over the runner-up in the primary, former Steve Cohen staffer Kyler Gilkey. It's also important to note that Szalaj was never voted into his position on the Shelby County Commission - he was appointed by the County Commission to replace Edmund Ford Jr. after his removal from that legislative body for federal corruption charges.

When reporter Sam Stockard (with the Tennessee Lookout) requested comment about the nomination, both TN House Rep Torrey Harris and Shelby County Democratic Party Chairman Willie Simon said that Thompson justified his decision by stating that Szalaj reached out to Thompson personally via phone, and that Thompson had promised his support during that phone call. Gilkey was less than pleased, and went on record to say that he didn't feel "as though one person should be able to decide the representation for 70,000 people in a district" and that ballots voters cast for him in the primary "were essentially null and void."

Harris and Simon decried the process, and Harris went so far as to say, "I have really studied this process, and we have to make some changes. I will be very blunt about that, because one individual cannot make a decision, or should not

make the decision, for 72,000 individuals in a district." However, neither argued that Thompson did not have the right to make the nomination, nor did they speculate on what was said (or promised) during that phone call.

We will not speculate either, other than to say there is far, far too much room in this clearly undemocratic process for thwarting the will of voters in favor of special interests, and the Shelby County Democratic Party must either reform its bylaws to prevent a situation like this from ever occurring again or face its voters removing the party officers at the next party convention.

District 85

Candidate

Jesse Chism (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 86 – Justin J. Pearson

Candidates

Justin J. Pearson (D)

Comments: [Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Justin J. Pearson](#). While we are rooting for [our recommended US House 9](#) candidate Justin J. Pearson to make it all the way to Washington D.C., he is also on the ballot to retain his Tennessee State House seat in the event his congressional bid is unsuccessful. We, of course, are recommending him in this position also, and cannot say enough good things about him.

District 87

Candidate

Karen Camper (D)

Reggie Hall (R)

Comments: TN House Minority Leader Karen Camper is a thoughtful pro-worker, pro-immigrant, pro-civil rights, pro-LGBT politician whose leadership of the Democratic caucus (especially during the upheaval of the past few months) has been steady, even if we would prefer a more confrontational posture in the face of Republican abuses of power. Her GOP opponent Reggie Hall defends Mayor Paul Young's support of data centers and has AI-generated campaign flyers that frame social safety net programs as "rewarding dependency".

District 88

Candidate

Larry Miller (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 91

Candidates

Torrey Harris (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 93

No Candidates Qualified

Comments: After the sudden loss of veteran progressive legislator G.A. Hardaway earlier this year, we were very interested to see what his son T.J. Hardaway would do when appointed to fill the vacancy by the Shelby County Commission. A former staffer for his father, T.J. had both family legacy and some practical experience behind him, but has chosen to attend law school with an eye towards following his father's footsteps in public service.

In his announcement that he was not seeking re-election to the TN House, Hardaway endorsed novice politician Kyler Gilkey, a former Steve Cohen staffer who had moved into the district and attempted to qualify via write-in. However, due to his having been on the ballot in the TN House 84 primary ([please read our entry on TN House 84 for more information](#)) state law prevented Gilkey from being a write-in candidate in another district. The qualified write-in candidates (former Democratic Shelby County Commission candidate John Bradley; retired educator Calvin Lacy; former independent State Senate candidate Mitchell Morrison; community advocate and former Democratic Shelby County Commission candidate Brandon Washington; and Tommy Brewington) have little information publicly available.

Of the write-in candidates, only John Bradley has a campaign website discoverable by Google search, and he is also the only candidate with any stated policy positions. We unfortunately cannot offer voters more guidance in this race due to a lack of available information.

District 95

Candidates

Kevin Vaughan (R)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 96

Candidates:

Dr. Telisa Franklin (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 97 – Jesse Huseh

Candidates:

Jesse Huseh (D)
John Gillespie (R)

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Jesse Huseh.** An old-school “labor Democrat” who combines a strong pro-worker platform with more moderate positions on other issues, Jesse Huseh was within two percentage points of winning the district in 2024 and represents the Tennessee Democratic Party’s main hope to flip a State House seat in the greater Memphis area this year. Huseh’s grounding in the labor movement (including multiple union endorsements) combined with his broad base of support within the party make him likely to appeal to both progressives and moderates, and there is a great deal of excitement surrounding his campaign. Given the horrible record of his GOP opponent John Gillespie, we feel that recommending Jesse is a sound decision despite our policy differences. Simply put, a Jesse Huseh victory would be a roadblock for the GOP and a win for the working people of Memphis.

District 98

Candidates:

Antonio Parkinson (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

District 99

Candidates:

Tom Leatherwood (R)
William Mouzon (I)

Comments: Progressive independent William Mouzon is facing off against GOP candidate Tom Leatherwood in a rematch of the 2024 race for this seat. The pro-choice Mouzon is a Navy veteran whose policy positions include allowing Tennesseans to place ballot measures on the state ballot directly by petition, as opposed to the current process that only allows the TN legislature to approve ballot measures. His opponent, GOP incumbent Tom Leatherwood, has held the seat since 2018 and is one of the largest supporters of the Memphis Safe Task Force in state government, going so far to place it as Number One on his campaign website’s “Issues” page.

TENNESSEE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT 1 - VOTE “NO”

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting NO on Amendment 1.** There are a number of reasons why denying bail is not helpful in preventing crime, but the most important is that it reinforces mass incarceration by keeping more people in jail. Our criminal justice system is broken and disproportionately targets people of color, and cash bail perpetuates that. When judges are already using loopholes to set unaffordable bail, we cannot give them more power to keep people in jail by taking away their right to bail. Lack of bail puts pressure on the accused to make a guilty plea to get out as soon as possible, even if they are falsely accused. And as we have seen in Memphis, being held at a jail like 201 Poplar on suspicion of a crime can end up being a death sentence.

Also concerning in this amendment is the proposed automatic denial of bail for a charge as specious as “an act of terrorism.” While no one in our organization condones terrorism, the charge itself has been used in the past to intimidate and “throw the book” at activists and organizers engaged in acts of civil disobedience and other forms of direct action. The Trump regime has also sought to expand the scope of what is considered terrorism to include leftist organizing spaces and any groups that outright oppose the expansion of fascist power in this country. This amendment would make it easier for the forces of the GOP-led state of Tennessee to retaliate against the people opposing their agenda.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT 2 - VOTE “NO”

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting NO on Amendment 2.** While no one likes to pay unnecessary taxes (and we especially do not want to put a burden on the working class) this amendment makes no distinction between personal property and commercial property bought by big corporations. Tennessee has not had a state property tax for decades, and that is unlikely to change, but if we vote yes on this, we essentially close the door on *ever* taxing billionaires and corporations by means of a property tax. After all, they are buying up property and getting rid of a way to tax them makes no sense, especially when commercial property taxes could be used for affordable housing or other community benefits.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT 3 - VOTE “NO”

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting NO on Amendment 3.** Just as stated in Amendment 1, the end goal of this amendment is to reinforce mass incarceration. While we respect victims’ rights as a key part of restorative justice, we must understand that the accused and the convicted have rights as well. Our goal should be to help reintegrate people into society and repair the harm done, not to keep them imprisoned past the point of their rehabilitation while re-traumatizing victims. At a certain point, a person’s debt to society must be recognized as having been paid. It is already routine for judges to receive statements from victims as part of their considerations when levying sentences and for these victim impact statements to be considered by parole boards in their deliberations. Passing this amendment would stack the deck in favor of carceral forces in this state for the foreseeable future, and this is why we feel that it is more harmful than beneficial.

TOWN OF COLLIERVILLE SCHOOL BOARD

Position 2 – Dr. Jason Morrison

Comments: **Memphis-Midsouth DSA recommends voting for Dr. Jason Morrison.** Jason Morrison promises equity and the prioritization of removing socioeconomic barriers within schools so that every child in Collierville public schools has an equal opportunity to succeed. Morrison has high community engagement, and he has made his stance on introducing equity into Collierville Schools publicly evident.

CITY OF MILLINGTON SCHOOL BOARD

Position 4

Candidates:

Marie L. Thomas (D)
Don Holsinger (R)

Comments: There is no recommendation in this race.

Position 6

Candidates:

Mandy Compton (D)

Comments: This is an uncontested election.

MEMPHIS CHARTER REFERENDUMS

REFERENDUM 5966 – VOTE “FOR THE AMENDMENT”

When the previously-independent public library system became part of the city government in the 1980's, the library workers were put in a bind: they could become city employees, but they wouldn't have the normal legal protections most government employees have. Instead of having civil service status, they would be considered political appointees. They would apply for jobs like every other city worker, they would interview with a manager like every other job, but at the end there was a twist: that manager would have to send a letter to the mayor, who would then "appoint" that worker to their new job.

This has gone on for decades, and although it sounds like a silly bit of bureaucracy, it actually is much more sinister. As "political appointees," library workers don't have the same rights as other city workers, or even employees of private companies. Library workers can be fired for no reason at all, they have limited rights to fight things like workplace discrimination, they can't collectively bargain or form a union, and their 1st Amendment rights to free expression are null and void if the mayor disagrees with them.

The library workers were put in that position on purpose, and it is written into the city charter to make it that way. However, there's great news: thanks to a campaign by library workers and supporters, there's a referendum on the ballot this November to correct this and give library workers the same rights and protections as other government employees. Referendum 5966 corrects this decades-long injustice, gives library workers long-overdue civil service protections, and would be a huge win for working people across Memphis. Memphis-Midsouth DSA has been proud to support this campaign every step of the way.

(As an aside, Referendum 5966 looks very confusing at first glance: it's a long list of different city positions that doesn't say anything about libraries or library workers, and you may be asking yourself, "What on earth does this have to do with library workers? Isn't Referendum 5966 to give library workers civil service protections?" Well, the reason for the big list is simple: it's the list of city workers that don't have civil service protections, library workers are **now** on it, and the referendum would update the language to **take them off** and make them regular city employees.)

REFERENDUM 5977 – VOTE “AGAINST THE AMENDMENT”

Referendum 5977, at first glance, appears to be a slam dunk: a registration list of lobbyists is a basic tool of transparency and ethics, and in the abstract, the members of our Electoral and Policy Committee like the idea of some sort of oversight of people paid to influence government. Memphis-Midsouth DSA is an all-volunteer organization with no paid staff, and if other organizations are claiming to represent the community but are instead representing the interests of wealthy donors, we would love to have that laid out for all to see.

There's a big fly in the ointment, however: while state law clearly defines a "lobbyist" as a person who attempts to exert influence on individuals within the state government in return for compensation, the Memphis City Charter is strangely silent on the matter. In fact the word "lobby" or "lobbyist" only appears once in the whole Memphis Code of Ordinances,

under the section governing the city Board of Ethics (Sec. 2-10-10). In it, the ordinance states that members of the board may not "lobby or employ a lobbyist" but fails to define those terms either on their own or in reference to state code.

Why are we saying all this? Because in our discussion of this referendum, it became clear that our members were skeptical of the referendum's effectiveness in curtailing ethics abuses, but we were also convinced of the potential for abuse of a so-called "lobbyist registry" when the term "lobbyist" is poorly defined. Instead of bringing greater transparency, it could instead require community advocates and volunteer organizers to publicly dox themselves in order to discuss issues with city officials, or even be used to exclude individuals from participation altogether.

While this is far from a certain use of these powers, recent overreaches by MPD and others towards those employing their First Amendment rights gives us too much pause, and our members have spoken. We recommend you vote "Against" the referendum, but continue advocating for increased transparency and oversight.

REFERENDUM 5978 – VOTE “AGAINST THE AMENDMENT”

Referendum 5978 appears benign enough: a simple change to the city charter to allow the City Council to set up a single set of procedures for civil service appeals. When met by questions from concerned citizens worried that the referendum could result in the loss of certain civil service protections for city employees, city attorney Allan Wade argued at the Aug. 4th City Council meeting that state law (the Tennessee Uniform Administrative Procedures Act) required certain protections, and that the referendum was merely a means to streamline the city's current process.

However, the referendum ordinance's sponsor, City Council member Chase Carlisle, showed his hand when he stated at that Aug. 4th meeting that Referendum 5978 was written directly in response to the Memphis library workers' ongoing campaign for civil service status. In fact, he reminded all present that he had stated he would respond to the campaign back in February. Multiple Memphis-Midsouth DSA members were present for Carlisle's remarks in February, when he made it abundantly clear that he was hostile to the very notion of civil service protections, asking library workers point blank "Why do you even want civil service?" before stating that it was an "outdated system" that he would like to do away with altogether.

We don't know why someone who said he wants to get rid of civil service protections altogether would try to engage in civil service reform, but we do know the timing is extremely suspect. By placing two civil service related measures on November's ballot, one giving workers more rights, one potentially taking workers' rights away, it becomes easy to muddy the waters and confuse people. However, we at Memphis-Midsouth DSA believe that voters can in fact walk and chew gum at the same time and will not be fooled by this obvious ploy. We recommend you vote "Against" Referendum 5978.