

# [***Disgraced coal CEO lost races as GOP and third party candidate. He's trying again as a Democrat***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW3-VV01-DYMD-652B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — [*Don Blankenship*](https://apnews.com/hub/don-blankenship) hasn't had much success running for office.

He ran for the Senate as a Republican in 2018 and sought the White House in 2020 as a third party candidate. He lost badly both times but is on the ballot again in 2024, this time [*as a Democrat*](https://apnews.com/article/west-virginia-don-blankenship-senate-f4b1c533d6529759df3a21755a021dbf) seeking the Senate seat being vacated by Joe Manchin.

Blankenship has plenty of baggage heading into the May 14 Democratic primary. Beyond his history of political losses, he's perhaps best known in this coal-producing state as the former chief executive of Massey Energy who [*spent a year in federal prison*](https://apnews.com/article/us-supreme-court-decisions-coal-mining-don-blankenship-government-and-politics-b4883d6e899f989b229a1600285fd4f3) for conspiring to violate mine safety laws before an explosion at his West Virginia coal mine killed 29 men in 2010.

With their threadbare Senate majority on the line in this year's elections, Democrats are already [*pessimistic about their chances*](https://apnews.com/article/west-virginia-joe-manchin-glenn-elliott-8b8ad1cb4989b4dc253b7cf95932285e) in West Virginia, where Manchin was the rare member of their party to find success in a state that Republican former President Donald Trump carried by nearly 39 percentage points in 2020. But a Blankenship victory in the primary could prove especially problematic for the party, leaving Democrats with an unpopular candidate with a complicated past in business and ***politics***.

The party and its union allies are working to avoid that scenario.

Earlier this week, Manchin endorsed Wheeling Mayor Glenn Elliott, who was an aide to legendary Democratic Sen. Robert C. Byrd and is unapologetically pro-union. State Democratic Party Chair Mike Pushkin argues Blankenship isn't a Democrat and is fond of referring to him as “federal prisoner 12393-088," a reference to his identification number while incarcerated. And Cecil Roberts, president of the United Mine Workers union — which endorsed Manchin in 2012 and 2018 — said seeing Blankenship file for the Senate as a Democrat “may be the most fraudulent and cynical move” he’s ever seen.

“And that’s saying a lot,” Roberts quipped. “If he’s a Democrat, then I’m Batman.”

In an interview, Blankenship argued that it's the Democratic Party that's inauthentic and that he's the candidate most aligned with West Virginians.

“Basically I hope to deliver the message that when West Virginians vote for a typical Democrat, they’re voting for the policies that they don’t believe in," he said. “That’s actually the reason they abandoned the party to begin with.”

In the Democratic primary, Elliott and Blankenship will face Marine Corps veteran and grassroots organizer Zach Shrewsbury. Jim Justice, the current governor and a wealthy coal operator, and Rep. Alex Mooney, a pro-Trump Republican, are competing for the GOP nomination.

In order to win, Blankenship must overcome the toxic atmosphere created by his highly publicized trial. Prosecutors portrayed Blankenship as a micromanager who put profits above safety and made their case using phone calls Blankenship secretly recorded in his Massey office. On those calls, Blankenship said a scathing internal safety memo should be kept confidential and would be a terrible document to show up in legal discovery if a mine fatality occurred.

Investigations found that worn and broken cutting equipment created a spark that ignited coal dust and methane gas. Broken and clogged water sprayers allowed what should have been a flare-up to become an inferno. An outspoken critic of then-President Barack Obama, Blankenship, along with his defense team, was ordered by a federal judge during his 2015 trial not to tell jurors he was being persecuted by Democrats.

Manchin was governor when the Massey Energy mine Blankenship ran blew up. By the time the ex-CEO was sentenced to a year in prison, Manchin was a U.S. senator.

“No sentence is severe enough,” he said on the day Blankenship was sentenced.

Blankenship still maintains that natural gas caused the tragedy and blamed Obama’s Mine Health Safety Administration for ventilation changes prior to the explosion. Prosecutors noted that regulators wouldn’t allow the mine’s old ventilation standard because of a 2006 fire that killed two people at another Massey mine in West Virginia.

Once one of Appalachia’s wealthiest men, Blankenship has spent thousands on lawsuits alleging he has been the victim of defamation and character assassination, all of which have been rejected by courts — including the U.S. Supreme Court. Before seeking office, Blankenship spent millions backing GOP candidates, including nearly $3.5 million in 2004 to help defeat a Democratic incumbent and elect the first Republican to the state Supreme Court in more than 80 years. His unabashed bankrolling of West Virginia Republicans inspired a John Grisham novel, “The Appeal.”

So far, West Virginia voters have given no indication they take him seriously as a candidate.

“The Republicans rejected him, so I’m pretty sure the Democrat Party will handily reject him as well,” said Shrewsbury, whose grandfather was a coal miner.

Shrewsbury said he has no respect for Blankenship, adding that “he’s not someone who should be in this race.” Shrewsbury and Elliott stress the importance of investing in green energy technology and criticized laws like “Right to Work” passed by the state's GOP supermajority to weaken union power.

“We need to fight for the worker, not the company store,” Shrewsbury said.

Manchin also has a tenuous relationship with Justice, the GOP race's likely frontrunner. Justice, who owns the swanky Greenbrier Hotel and dozens of other businesses, was recruited by Manchin to run as a Democrat for governor before switching parties at a 2017 rally for Trump.

Justice’s mining companies have been scrutinized for alleged safety violations and unpaid taxes, and he's also been sued by retirees of his coal companies over prescription drug coverage interruptions.

Elliott said Justice isn't what West Virginia needs.

“He’s protecting coal, that’s what he’s going to say,” Elliott said. “Ask the coal miners who work for him how much he’s protecting the coal miners.”

He said struggling people living in dying coal counties want realistic solutions.

“Look, there’s room to protect the coal jobs that we have, but also admit that the world is changing and that we have to be investing in ourselves, and not just expecting some outside industry — be it an extractive industry or anything else — to save us.”

Mindi Stewart, whose husband Stanley “Goose” Stewart was working at Upper Big Branch and survived on the day of the disaster, said she and her husband don’t like seeing Blankenship being given any platform.

Goose was 300 feet (about 91 meters) inside the mine when it blew up. He tried to revive some of his fallen co-workers, then covered their bodies with blankets, their faces obscured by soot.

Stewart said they were shocked when Blankenship decided to run as a Democrat. But she said they’re starting to see it differently.

“We know he’s going to run every chance he gets and we know why he is running,” she said. "We know, and I think he knows, he’ll never get elected. Being found guilty has eaten him alive from the moment it happened.”

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