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Tim Walz vs JD Vance: How Kamala and Trump's vice presidents are competing for rural votes

Minnesota governor and Kamala Harris' running mate could be the Democratic solution to Republican dominance of rural American votes

By [Daniel Gateno](#)

Far from the urban centers and lifestyles provided by big cities, rural America [has](#) turned to [Donald Trump](#) and the [Republican Party](#) to represent its interests. The growing leanings of rural voters have further blurred the lines between what it means to be a Republican and a Democrat. But a friendly, middle-aged man who loves hunting and fishing and hails from a small rural town in Nebraska may be the Democratic antidote in this election.

Minnesota Governor [Tim Walz , who is running mate to Kamala Harris](#) , has gone viral on social media and [gained political prominence for adopting a new line of attack](#) by calling former US President Donald Trump and his running mate, [JD Vance](#) , “outsiders.” But Walz’s impact on the Democratic ticket could be much greater.

The politician is [a veteran of the National Guard, a former public school teacher, a football coach and represented a heavily Republican district in Minnesota in the U.S. Congress from 2007 to 2019](#). He believes his record qualifies him to speak to rural Americans, a conservative-leaning electorate that is suffering from job and education shortages and is increasingly moving away from the [Democratic Party](#).



Vice presidential candidate and Minnesota governor Tim Walz attends a trade show in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. *Photo: Stephen Maturen/AFP*

The vice presidential candidate is seeking to contrast with his opponent, Senator JD Vance, a Republican who also has a rural background and who became known in 2016 when he released his autobiography “Once Upon a Hill: The Story of a Working-Class Family and the Crisis of American Society.” With the book, which became a *New York Times* bestseller, [Vance became a kind of spokesperson for the reality of the rural American working class and the movement that led to Donald Trump's victory in 2016.](#)

JD Vance and Tim Walz represent the rural population in completely different ways, says Lisa Pruitt, a law professor at the University of California and an expert on the American rural population.

“It’s quite surprising that they both have rural roots given their ideological distances. They come from different places and have different attitudes toward rural life,” Pruitt said.



Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance attends a campaign rally in Boston, United States. *Photo: Josh Reynolds/AP*

Dispute for the same electorate

Since being chosen as Kamala's running mate, Walz has tried to highlight his differences with Vance. At a rally in Omaha, Nebraska, Walz said Vance does not represent rural America and does not know traditionally Republican states, such as Nebraska.

“Walz speaks to rural voters in a way that other Democrats couldn’t,” says Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in an interview with **Estadão**. “He has an authentic way that can contribute to the rural population.”



Minnesota Governor Tim Walz attends a meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota. *Photo: Jenn Ackerman/NYT*

For JD Vance, the task is “easier” because he is a Republican. “Rural America is very conservative, so Donald Trump and JD Vance are attractive candidates to this population simply because they are from the Republican Party,” says Theiss-Morse.

Vance became famous even before he entered politics. After the publication of his best-selling book in 2016, he was frequently asked to give interviews to major American networks about his difficult childhood in Ohio and Kentucky [and the decline of a rural working class that felt forgotten by the Democratic Party and gravitated to Trump](#).

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Differences

The book chronicles Vance's impoverished childhood in Middletown, Ohio, where he suffered domestic violence, witnessed abuse and was raised by his grandparents because of his mother's drug addiction. The politician's family also has roots in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, one of the poorest places in the United States and suffering from an opioid crisis.

Despite also having spent his childhood in rural America, Walz's reality in Nebraska and Minnesota could not be more different.

“There is much greater inequality in terms of wealth, income and a higher poverty rate in the Appalachian region and also in Ohio than in Nebraska and Minnesota,” says Lisa Pruitt, an expert on rural American populations.



U.S. Senator and vice presidential candidate JD Vance attends a campaign rally with his wife, Usha Vance. *Photo: Morry Gash/AP*

Vance’s reality impacted the way he viewed his own neighbors as a child. In his book, “Once Upon a Hill: The Story of a Working-Class Family and the Crisis of American Society,” Vance argues that the lack of personal responsibility of the people who lived in the neighborhoods where he grew up was one of the reasons for poverty and drug addiction.

“If you feel like you are competing with your neighbors for resources and goods, your thinking about your community is different,” says the expert.

According to Pruitt, states like Nebraska and Minnesota have a higher economic standard than Appalachia and Ohio. “This standard can impact people’s attitudes toward their neighbors. That’s why Tim Walz’s policies seem more generous,” he adds.



Democratic vice presidential candidate and Minnesota governor Tim Walz talks to a crowd at a fair in Falcon Heights. *Photo: Clay Masters/AP*

Tim Walz's Country Life

Walz, 60, was born in West Point, Nebraska, but grew up between Valentine and Butte, a town with a population of just 270, according to the U.S. census. His father, James Walz, a Korean War veteran, was an elementary school principal who died of lung cancer when the governor was 17.

After meeting his wife, Gwen Whipple, Walz moved to Minnesota in 1994 and taught at a public high school in Mankato. In 2006, he defeated the incumbent Republican candidate to represent the so-called 1st District, a rural area in the southern part of the state.

“Walz was elected during a Democratic wave in Congress in 2006 and held his post during the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump,” says Timothy Lynch, professor of political science at Saint Thomas University in Minneapolis, the capital of the state of Minnesota.



US Vice President Kamala Harris attends the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, United States, alongside her running mate Tim Walz. *Photo: Erin Schaff/ NYT*

Kamala's running mate was seen as a moderate Democrat with positions palatable to the conservative rural region he represented in the US Congress. He was endorsed by the National Rifle Association and was included by a trade magazine on a list of 20 politicians that gun owners should vote for.

But in 2018, when Walz ran for governor of Minnesota, some of his views changed. [He was accused by voters in the district he represented of becoming a progressive.](#)

Motivated by a series of shootings across the United States, Walz signed gun control measures in Minnesota after being elected in 2019. With a Democratic majority in the state legislature, the governor also signed legislation that provided financial credit to low-income families with children, created a paid leave program, invested in clean energy, made college tuition free for certain students and guaranteed breakfast and lunch for children in public schools.

According to Lynch, Walz didn't necessarily change his positions on every issue when he became governor, but there are differences in what one can do as a congressman versus in an executive office. "Members of Congress can be less ideological than in state government. Walz was focused on what he could deliver for the district, which is why he survived Republican waves, like in 2016."



Minnesota Governor and Kamala Harris' running mate Tim Walz attends the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, United States. Photo: Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post

The expert points out that Walz's experience as a congressman may be more important than his time as governor for voters and also for his possible tenure as vice president. "Walz has spent a long time in Congress, he can contribute in the Senate to pass important legislation and has already proven that he can work with Republicans."

Criticized for his alleged ideological shift, Kamala's running mate defended himself by stating that caring for one's community is not a progressive characteristic.

"Walz wants to send the message that all the progressive legislation he's passed is not progressive, it's just very rural," says Theiss-Morse of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "There's nothing more rural than taking care of your community."

Challenge for Democrats

Democrats know that Republican dominance in rural communities won't be broken in a single election cycle, but in an election that is likely to be decided by small margins, any narrowing of that deficit could be important in defining victory.

According to Theiss-Morse, the Democratic Party is trying to convey a different message in this campaign, emphasizing the ideas of freedom and patriotism, two flags that were previously

associated with the Republican Party. “In this election, the Democrats want to convey that they are a party for everyone and having a rural person on the ticket helps in this process.”

In addition to contributing to his record, Walz is also trying to attract more white working-class men to the Democratic Party. The governor helped organize the group “White Men for Kamala,” which raised \$4.5 million for the Democrat’s campaign.

But putting Walz on the ticket won’t solve all of the party’s problems with rural communities, Pruitt said. “Democrats need to campaign more in rural areas, they need to put more people out there talking to rural communities. They’ve failed to do that since [Barack Obama](#) was elected in 2008, and Walz isn’t going to solve all of those problems by himself.”