

Analysis of the Vance-Walz Vice Presidential Debate

Five top takeaways

1. **No harm done.** The primary mission last night for both Senator JD Vance and Governor Tim Walz was to do no harm to their respective campaigns. Both succeeded. Vance showed a more moderate side of himself and Walz, after a shaky start, found his footing as the debate went on. In addition, they effectively defended the positions and statements of their running mates – a critically important job for a VP candidate – and added some context to key issues.
2. **Midwestern civility reigned.** The two candidates showed that they could disagree with one another while being respectful, a notable shift from the more aggressive debate style and hostility between former President Trump and Vice President Harris. At times, both Vance and Walz said they agreed with one other about the challenges facing Americans but disagreed on the solutions to address each issue. For more pointed attacks, they talked about the other's running mate.
3. **Spotlight on the candidates.** In addition to policy, this was an opportunity for both to introduce themselves to a national audience as neither candidate has broad recognition nor high favorability ratings among voters. Both shared their military and education backgrounds, talked about their families, and wove personal beliefs into their answers. Neither was particularly adept in responding when moderators asked about past misstatements and changed positions.
4. **Pressed on multiple issues.** The debate began with events of the past few days — the devastation across the U.S. from Hurricane Helene and the growing conflict in the Middle East — but quickly moved to a host of other topics, including immigration, the economy, trade, climate change, health care and the outcome of 2020 election. The two disagreed and fact-checked one another on almost every issue but stuck to policy differences rather than personal attacks.
5. **Abortion rights remain in the spotlight.** Vance said he understands Republicans' need to earn back the trust of Americans, citing voter initiatives, like in Ohio, which have expanded or maintained abortion access. However, Vance continued to defend his stance that states should decide abortion laws. Walz, calling for a reinstatement of *Roe v. Wade*, shared stories of several women who have experienced life-threatening challenges due to anti-abortion laws, including one who lost her life.

Notable moments + key issues debated

Some of the sound bites that will be most shared

- Near the end of the debate, when pushed by Walz, Vance declined to say Donald Trump lost the 2020 election. Walz sharply criticized Vance's non-answer and Democrats are aggressively pushing out the exchange online.
- Walz, in an obviously uncomfortable moment, conceded that he was not in Hong Kong during the deadly Tiananmen Square protests in June of 1989. In recent days, multiple media outlets have reported that Walz, then a high school teacher, didn't travel until August of 1989. Walz has been criticized for making misleading statements.
- Vance also faced tough questioning about his previous statements against Trump. Then, when asked about immigration and border security, both candidates referenced Springfield, Ohio, the debunked story related to Haitian migrants that was amplified by Vance and Trump. Vance tried to downplay it while still standing by the story. However, the moderators started to fact check following Vance's answer, which they said they wouldn't do. Watch for Republicans to follow Vance's lead that moderators were unfair.
- Multiple times, Vance compared the problems Americans face today — cost of groceries and gas, war in the Middle East and Ukraine — to how Americans felt four years ago. His argument: Americans were better off financially and safer under Trump.
- As the debate wore on, Walz became more animated and landed some punches, like this one on the economy when he said, for people like teachers, nurses, truck drivers, "how is it fair that you're paying your taxes every year and Donald Trump hasn't paid any federal tax in the last 15 years?"

- Vance addressed Trump’s debate gaffe referring to “concepts of a plan” for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) with more detail. But then Vance said that Trump saved the ACA while in office, which was easily debunked by Walz who called their plan dangerous and pointed out that Trump tried to repeal and replace the ACA.
- In a moment of sincerity related to gun violence, Walz shared his son experienced a shooting at a community center. When Vance responded, he started his by saying he was so sorry to hear that and didn’t know that had happened, an unexpected but likely welcomed bit of empathy.

Other issues they sparred over

- **Speaking to the middle class:** Vance championed the Made in America platform and criticized Harris for not implementing her proposed economic policies while in office. Walz highlighted Trump’s large tax cut that disproportionately benefited the wealthy and attacked his presidential record from Covid-19 and healthcare to the loss of manufacturing jobs. Although both campaigns have made promises to cut taxes, neither has articulated how they would be paid for.
- **Tariffs and trade:** Walz criticized Trump’s plan for across-the-board tariffs by describing them as a consumption tax or national sales tax that would raise prices. Vance praised Biden for keeping many of Trump’s tariffs in place which have helped protect American manufacturing jobs, but said Harris was running away from that policy. On U.S.-China trade relations, the two agreed on the importance of “derisking” the U.S. economy and revitalizing domestic manufacturing.
- **U.S. relations with Israel:** Mere hours following Iran’s launch of nearly 200 ballistic missiles at Israel, the first question asked of the candidates was about supporting a “preemptive” Israeli strike on Iran. Walz sidestepped the question, emphasizing Washington’s role in defending Israel and countering Iranian proxies. Vance took a clearer stance, stating that it is Israel’s decision to ensure its safety, and the U.S. should support its allies in their fight against adversaries.

What’s next

- This was the last big “event” of the 2024 campaign as there are no further debates scheduled, and it is unlikely to have moved the needle for undecided voters. VP debates typically don’t have much impact on the outcome of the presidential election and there is nothing to suggest that has changed with this one.
- While we may see more details on campaign promises and plans, like the Trump vs. Harris economic approaches, don’t count on too many details beyond talking points by both camps.
- Both campaigns now will turn to their respective ground games to turn out their voters between now and Election Day.

Is there anything my company/organization should do?

- Now is the time to plan for election (and crisis) scenarios, develop a range of possible communications for Election Day and plan for post-election stakeholder engagement.
- APCO continues to counsel that most companies and/or organizations don’t need to issue any communications following the debate, especially if they do not traditionally weigh in on political issues or policy. Polling shows most organizations have stakeholders split between the two parties, so an ad-hoc, reactive response may create new issues for your company or organization.
- If a response is needed due to a specific policy mention during the debate, APCO is ready to assist with communications guidance, including message development, opportunity/risk assessment, outreach guidance, and scenario planning.

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