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A combination photo shows Republican vice presidential nominee U.S. Senator JD Vance of Ohio speaking during a rally in Grand Rapids, Mich., July 20, 2024, and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, who accepted his nomination as the Democratic vice presidential nominee Aug. 21, speaking inside the Earth Rider Brewery in Superior, Wis., Jan. 25, 2024. (OSV News/Tom Brenner, Reuters)

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While the selection of a running mate in recent decades has had little discernible electoral impact on elections, experts told OSV News the selection of vice presidential candidates can be a signal of how a presidential candidate intends to campaign or govern, including in areas of interest to Catholics such as abortion, climate, immigration and labor.

Vice President Kamala Harris — who secured the Democratic Party's nomination for president shortly after President Joe Biden ended his reelection bid in July and endorsed her — selected Gov. Tim Walz, D-Minn., as her running mate Aug. 6. Weeks earlier, on July 15, former President Donald Trump named Ohio Sen. JD Vance, as his running mate on the Republican ticket.

The selection of a running mate "can shift perception of the presidential candidate's ideology," said Christopher Devine, an associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton, Ohio, and a leading expert on vice presidential candidates who co-wrote "Do Running Mates Matter? The Influence of Vice Presidential Candidates in Presidential Elections." In that respect, Devine told OSV News that both Trump and Harris "passed on an opportunity" to shift voters' perceptions of them with their selections.

"So in 2020, Kamala Harris was perceived to be further to the left than Joe Biden, and opinions of her ideology shifted perception of Biden's ideology," Devine said. "So basically, the further people thought that Harris was to the left, the further they thought Biden was to the left."

Stressing that a selection of a running mate doesn't generally come down to any single factor — and can include electoral strategy, coalition building, or even chemistry between the pair — he said both presidential candidates chose running mates to whom they are closely ideologically aligned.

"What does matter most to voters is what they think of the presidential candidate, and that is what can be influenced by the choice of running mate," Devine said.

Meghan J. Clark, an associate professor of moral theology at St. John's University in the Queens borough of New York and the author of "The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights," pointed to areas of convergence and divergence with Catholic social teaching in both the records of Vance and Walz on a range of issues.

As governor, Walz worked on providing children school lunches without parents directly shouldering the cost, and a paid leave program for medical and family needs. But Walz also worked to expand legal protections for abortion.

"While there is a deep chasm between Catholic theology and the Harris-Walz position on abortion, there are convergences on many issues such as economic justice, combating poverty, racial justice and addressing climate change," Clark explained. "Catholic social teaching asks us to evaluate political candidates and policies not from self-interest, but from the perspective of the vulnerable and marginalized."

Walz has been a staunch supporter of expanding access to abortion. As governor, he signed into state law a bill that codified abortion as a right in Minnesota after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, its nearly 50-year precedent establishing abortion as a constitutional right, and to return the issue of abortion back to the legislature.

But in the days leading up to his selection as the vice presidential nominee, Vance also moderated his position on abortion. During his U.S. Senate bid, Vance said he supported a federal 15-week abortion ban — a measure potentially affecting nearly 6% of abortions in the U.S.

But Vance has since aligned with Trump's view that abortion policy should be left to the states, and he confirmed Aug. 25 that Trump would "absolutely" veto a national abortion ban if Congress passed such a law.

On July 7 with NBC's "Meet the Press," Vance said he also supported mifepristone, a pill commonly used for first-trimester abortion, "being accessible."

Although mifepristone can be used in early miscarriage care protocols, Vance did not qualify his statement. Nearly nine out of 10 abortions take place within the first trimester, with more than six of 10 abortions performed through mifepristone.

According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website on the seven themes of Catholic social teaching, "The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency."

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Clark pointed to other policy areas involving Catholic social teaching with respect to the vice presidential nominees.

On the issues of labor — a foundational aspect of Catholic social teaching on human dignity since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical "Rerum Novarum" — she pointed to areas of potential overlap between Walz's record and Catholic social thought.

"Gov. Walz has a long record supporting the dignity of work and a priority for the excluded," she said. "The way he unapologetically defends his universal school breakfast and lunch policy is a clear example of common ground — it shows he understands our common responsibility for our neighbor."

Vance, Clark said, has a shorter record as an elected official than Walz and is therefore "more perplexing." Similar to Trump, Vance sometimes differs from traditional Republican policy approaches.

"On economic justice, he co-sponsored a bill with Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., to address bank executives' compensation when banks go under, and (he) has spoken in favor of an expanded child tax credit," Clark said. "In practice, however, he has not advocated for the expired expanded child tax credit among Republicans in Congress."

Vance, a convert to Catholicism, has frequently discussed a more aggressive policy approach to combating root causes of poverty and called for a higher minimum wage. But Clark pointed to some issues, such as Vance's campaign-trail rhetoric about mass deportations — an act explicitly condemned alongside abortion and

other moral evils by the Second Vatican Council and St. John Paul II's magisterium — as problematic.

"More troubling, however, are his statements on immigrants — which simply are unacceptable from the perspective of Catholic teaching," she said, adding that Vance has made similarly problematic remarks on the campaign trail vis-a-vis Catholic social teaching concerning climate change and women.

Clark said Harris' selection of Walz may signal her priorities in choosing a running mate may have had more to do with governing than campaigning — citing his experiences as an educator, congressional representative and governor — and Harris' "desire to both bring together the diverse Democratic caucus and lay the foundation for delivering in office."

With the selection of Vance, a former Trump critic turned staunch supporter, Clark said the former president "signaled that the GOP is his party, and his personal base is now the Republican base."

The 2024 presidential election is Nov. 5, although some states begin early voting by mid-September and October.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.