Opinion
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A combination photo shows Republican vice presidential nominee U.S. Sen. JD Vance of Ohio

A combination photo shows Republican vice presidential nominee U.S. Sen. JD Vance of Ohio speaking during a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, July 20, 2024, and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, the Democratic vice presidential nominee, speaking inside the Earth Rider Brewery in Superior, Wisconsin, Jan. 25, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Tom Brenner)



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If history is any judge, then a vice presidential debate is not really determinative for the election. And the most remarkable thing about the debate was the realization that American politics can still produce a mostly cogent, thoughtful debate, provided Donald Trump is not on the stage.

Ohio Sen. JD Vance and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz both dropped religious references into their comments. Walz invoked the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25: "Whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers." Vance, during the discussion of gun violence in schools, said, "Christ have mercy." Neither man is running to be theologian-in-chief, or vice theologian-in-chief and they know it, so these references

must have had something to do with both parties' internal polling of undecided voters. Still, neither candidate distinguished himself by linking his religious quotes to a coherent public ethic.

How many times was Vance able to say "illegal aliens" when discussing housing policy?

How could Walz frame his party's pro-abortion stance as pro-family without acknowledging the fact that his arguments erase the very existence of the smallest members of the family?

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Vance is clearly very smart. His range of references is the widest of any of the four national candidates to take to the debate stage this year. He makes cogent arguments and mostly does not stoop to the level of slogans. He is quick on his feet intellectually.

After Walz cited economic experts to defend his and Vice President Kamala Harris' policy proposals, Vance delivered a powerful critique of expertise that both reinforced the GOP's anti-elites populism and reminded voters, especially undecided voters, of the ways Democrats had relied on economic experts to justify their embrace of neo-liberal economics that greatly harmed working-class voters. And, for most of the night, Vance was the dominant figure on the stage.

Walz' best moment came at the very end of the debate, when he pointedly asked Vance if Trump lost the 2020 election, and Vance dodged the question, muttering something about Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton taking out Facebook ads questioning the influence of Russia on the results of the 2016 election. In his best line of the night, Walz replied, "January 6 was not Facebook ads." It was the best punch Walz landed all night.

Still, and setting aside differences of policy and outlook for the moment, there is something not quite right about Vance, and it came out when he started invoking Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Tulsi Gabbard about the need to permit misinformation during a pandemic.

Watching Vance always puts me in mind of a previous Republican Vice President, Dan Quayle. If Quayle had gone to Yale University, he could have been Vance 40 years ago. Both conflate culture and politics in ways that could charitably be called clumsy. Last night, I kept waiting for Vance to denounce Murphy Brown. Quayle lacked Vance's intellect, but intellect can be marshaled as a harness or as a spur, and if a person is aiming at the wrong thing, intellect is unhelpful. Dictators and criminals can be massively smart even while they are morally impoverished or worse.

In part, people fear Vance's views because they often come off as regressive and reactionary. Think of "childless cat ladies." In part, the fear is precisely because his views are so well-developed; he unwittingly discloses a rigid ideological quality that is antithetical to America's deep-seeded cultural disposition towards pragmatism.

Walz suffers from the opposite problem. He comes across as a super nice guy, with a big heart, but he is applying to be the understudy for a job that requires impossibly difficult decisions and sometimes hard-headed analysis. Can anyone really detail Walz' worldview? His views are generically progressive, but millions of Americans warm to Trump precisely because he routinely attacks progressive political and cultural elites. Worse, Walz can come across as vacuous, someone you might want for a neighbor but not for a leader.

> Vance made himself seem less scary than usual. Walz was the "everyman" that is his political calling card. Will any of it matter?
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Walz brought up the issue of Vance's false accusations against Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio, but failed to nail Vance down on that score. When Vance linked migration to housing costs, he opened himself up for an easy hit, but Walz failed to land a blow. Walz failed to confront Vance's rigid opposition to any gun control legislation in the face of school shootings. When the moderators asked about Walz' previous claims he was in China during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, he completely, and ineffectively, evaded answering the question. He looked weak.

Walz had some good lines. "My farmers [in Minnesota] know climate change is real" was a good line to which Vance had no good retort. In the debate about abortion,

both candidates disappointingly cited hard cases, without acknowledging that hard cases make bad law. Walz nonetheless scored points by noting that the Democrats include programs like paid family leave in their budget and Republicans don't. Walz frequently tangled his words but voters do the same and are very forgiving of those problems.

The most interesting side of Walz that was on display frequently last night, and which we had not seen before, was the habits of the mind of a former congressman. He talked about negotiating with Republicans, finding common ground, recognizing the need to compromise, not always getting everything you want. I don't suppose that side of him is helpful in this fraught, polarized electorate, but it was nice to see it could still poke through.

Will any of it matter? Vance made himself seem less scary than usual. Walz was the "everyman" that is his political calling card. Both men managed to communicate their key talking points. If you were grading this debate against that by the two presidential candidates, this one was more substantive to be sure.

If you had to pick a debate winner last night, Vance clearly won. But it isn't clear Walz lost. Will this affect the election? Probably not.