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POLITICS / 2024 ELECTIONS

Is Tim Walz a progressive or a centrist — or both?

Everyone from Joe Manchin to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is singing his praises. Someone is going to be disappointed.

by **Andrew Prokop**
Aug 9, 2024 at 3:30 AM PDT

US Democratic vice presidential candidate and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP via Getty

Andrew Prokop is a senior politics correspondent at Vox, covering the White House, elections, and political scandals and investigations. He's worked at Vox since the site's launch in 2014, and before that, he worked as a research assistant at the New Yorker's Washington, DC, bureau.

Sen. Joe Manchin (I-WV) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) have their fair share of disagreements about policy and politics.

But they both agree that Tim Walz is an excellent vice presidential nominee.

"Gov. Walz is the real deal," Manchin gushed, saying he'd "bring balance back to the Democratic Party."

Walz is "a uniter for not just the Democratic Party but for the entire United States," Ocasio-Cortez claimed.

The fact that Walz appeals to two of the most ideologically disparate Democrats (or former Democrat, in Manchin's case) is encouraging to the party. But it also suggests the possibility that everyone is projecting their own agendas and expectations onto Walz — and that some people are going to be wrong.

And yet it also may raise questions about where he truly is, ideologically.

Is he a true-believing progressive with an everyman-coding personal style? Or is he a pragmatic politician willing to rein in the excesses of the left?

The answer is that, at different times and on different issues, he's been both of those things — but always with an affable smile.

As governor of Minnesota, Walz enacted a sweeping progressive agenda geared toward helping the disadvantaged and marginalized. But he's also been willing to accommodate business's concerns and explore pro-market reforms.

Back when he was in Congress, Walz backed President Barack Obama's biggest priorities. But he also questioned the economic and foreign policy establishments in ways that have aged well politically — without ever really becoming a controversial ideological firebrand or totally breaking from the mainstream.

Indeed, in some ways, Walz reminds me of Joe Biden, who himself had an anti-elite streak, attempted to keep his coalition happy, questioned the foreign policy establishment's wisdom, and tried to go big with a sweeping progressive agenda in office, while also at times making concessions to politics.

Walz signed a sweeping progressive agenda into law in Minnesota last year

The case for Walz as an unusually bold progressive basically comes down to the Minnesota bills he signed into law in 2023.

Walz's first term as governor was legislatively uneventful because Republicans held the state Senate, but Democrats took over control of that chamber by a single seat in the 2022 midterms and held the state House as well.

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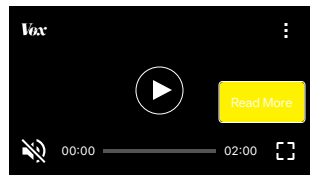
Suddenly, Democrats had the power to pass their priorities into law, and oh, did they ever. The Minnesota Reformer has an excellent detailed rundown of Walz's new laws, but in brief:

State Democrats passed a child tax credit, tuition aid, free school breakfast and lunch for all students, worker protections, and paid family and medical leave. They passed criminal justice reform, abortion rights protections, gender-affirming care protections, and universal background checks for gun purchases.

They legalized recreational marijuana, restored voting rights to felons who had completed their terms of incarceration, let unauthorized immigrants get driver's licenses and tuition aid, and reformed permitting so the state could transition to clean energy more quickly. They greatly increased spending on infrastructure, schools, affordable housing, and public safety. They raised taxes on the wealthy and corporations, as well as the sales tax.

How did all this happen? In part, Walz was fortunate that the state had a massive budget surplus (due to broad macroeconomic trends plus a decade of divided government), which meant that more painful tax increases weren't necessary to pay for all this new spending. But both he and Democrats in the legislature turned out to be like-minded in their desire to go big.

"You don't win elections to bank political capital — you win elections to burn political capital and improve lives," Walz said at the time. This, of course, is exactly what progressives love to hear.



As governor, Walz did occasionally oppose progressive priorities

Though Walz signed a slew of progressive bills, there are also a few examples where he resisted or rejected progressives' demands, arguing they were going too far.

One such showdown occurred when the legislature seemed set to pass a bill championed by the state nurses union.

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The bill would have given care workers a say in determining minimum nurse staffing levels in hospitals. But Mayo Clinic, the state's largest private sector employer, furiously opposed the bill, and threatened to pull out billions in state investments if it passed.

Walz "pressured legislators" to carve out Mayo Clinic from the staffing mandate, the Minnesota Reformer's Max Nesterak wrote. Ultimately, the legislature dropped the mandate from the bill.

The Minnesota Nurses Association said in a statement then that they "denounce Governor Tim Walz for his abdication of good government and acquiescence to anti-democratic and anti-labor corporate bullies." They added: "By allowing corporate executives to dictate our public policy behind closed doors, Governor Walz has made clear to Minnesotans that their democratic process does not work for them, but for the wealthy and powerful few."

Another showdown occurred over a bill to regulate rideshare companies and create protections for drivers, which Uber and Lyft opposed.

The legislature passed the bill anyway in 2023, but Walz then issued his first and so far only veto, saying the bill "could make Minnesota one of the most expensive states in the country for ride share." (After a year of wrangling, Democrats made various concessions, dropping some of the provisions the companies most opposed, and Walz signed the revised bill into law.)

The rideshare and nursing bill battles provide clues about Walz's political instincts. The two major progressive policies he shied away from were the ones that could imperil jobs in the state, result in higher prices for the public, or put him at war with important business interests.

Another mini-conflict with the legislature occurred when Walz initially resisted a proposal to let unauthorized immigrants get state-subsidized health insurance. This spurred a state representative to tell the Minnesota Reformer: "The governor needs to understand that the Legislature writes the bills. At the end of the day, we decide what goes in them, and he has the opportunity to veto them." (Walz signed it.)

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Finally, after Walz signed a law preventing law enforcement officers in schools from restraining students by holding them facedown on the floor, he faced a backlash from police, who said it risked officers' safety. Eventually, the legislature rolled back the change, with his approval.

In Congress, Walz was reasonably progressive in a Republican district

It's also enlightening to look back at how Walz handled a very different political situation — his 12 years as a House of Representative member representing a Republican-leaning district. Then, he was not quite the enthusiastic "go big" progressive he became as governor. But he was a loyal Democrat on most issues rather than a true moderate maverick.

During the Obama presidency, Walz backed the president on the big votes that mattered, such as the Affordable Care Act and the cap-and-trade bill. When that latter bill became the subject of attacks, Walz said he wasn't "altogether comfortable" with it and expected it to change in the Senate, but that he voted for it to move the process forward.

Walz's congressional record suggests some skepticism toward the economic policy establishment — or some sensitivity toward his constituents' suspicions of that establishment. Walz voted against the 2008 bank bailout and even publicly opposed the auto industry bailout (arguing that it "failed to protect the taxpayers").

In 2011, when 60 Minutes reported on suspicious stock trades by members of Congress, Walz became a leading champion of a bill to rein in such trades: the STOCK Act, which passed the following year. (Walz reportedly does not own a single stock.)

Yet Walz was never a firebrand populist in the vein of Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren. He emphasized the importance of deficit reduction. He supported building the Keystone XL pipeline (something many climate activists opposed).

On marriage for same-sex couples, he was strikingly progressive; he openly supported it as far back as his first congressional campaign in 2006 (six years before Obama did). On guns, however, he touted the endorsement of the NRA in every cycle. (When he ran for governor in 2017 and had to win a Democratic primary, he changed his views on guns, loudly supporting new restrictions.)

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Overall, on domestic policy, Walz's record suggests that he's a progressive who was trying to get elected in a swing district. Or, as he put it, "I learned the art of compromise without compromising my values."

Walz has an antiwar streak, but he isn't too far from the party's foreign policy mainstream

During his congressional career, Walz was a skeptic of US military intervention abroad — putting him clearly in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party on such topics, but not too far left of the party's mainstream.

For instance, he first ran for Congress in 2006 on an anti-Iraq war platform. Once elected, he advocated for a speedy withdrawal from Iraq, but when the Bush Administration refused to do that, he voted to keep funding the war.

Perhaps his biggest test came in September 2013, when President Obama requested that Congress give him authority to intervene militarily against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, in retaliation for the regime's use of chemical weapons during the country's civil war.

Much of the American foreign policy establishment believed such an intervention was urgently necessary, to enforce a "red line" Obama had set the previous year. House GOP leaders backed him, and even House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), who had opposed the war in Iraq, urged Democrats in her chamber to get on board. But much of the war-weary American public opposed the idea, and opposition started bubbling up among both parties' congressional rank and file.

That opposition included Walz. "While I believe the use of chemical weapons is despicable and the world must take action to ensure that cruel dictators are not allowed to use such weapons without repercussions," Walz said in a September 9 statement, "at this time I cannot in good conscience support current proposals to take unilateral, military action." At that point, Walz was one of just a few dozen House Democrats who had spoken out so publicly — the vast majority of the caucus remained uncommitted. (Congress never ended up holding a vote on the measure.)

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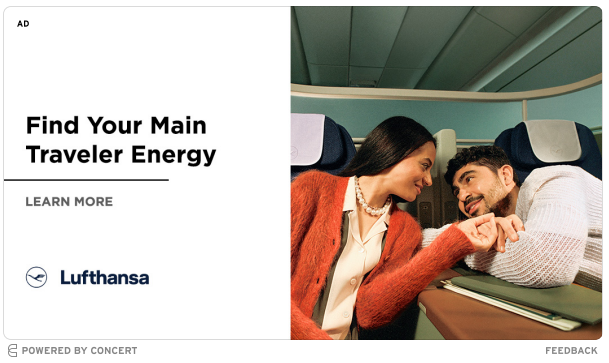

Walz's instincts were well in tune with public skepticism about striking Syria and tracked how both parties were shifting on military interventions abroad.

But don't jump to the conclusion that he's any sort of foreign policy leftist. For instance, on the Israel-Gaza war, however, Walz has sounded generally in agreement with the Biden administration's policy.

Like Biden, he has expressed frustration with various Israeli decisions and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but he hasn't called for a unilateral Israeli cease-fire or for the US to cut off funding for Israel.

Calling for a cease-fire "can't just be virtue-signaling," he said in March, because in his view it must come with the return of all Hamas's hostages and an elevation of the Palestinian Authority over Hamas.

He's said the war in Gaza is "intolerable," but also added that "what happened on October 7 was intolerable" too.

Walz's politics have a lot of similarities to Joe Biden's

Overall, defining Walz in terms of the party's ideological camps is surprisingly difficult, which makes him interestingly reminiscent of Joe Biden.

Often during his long career, Biden was a mainstream Democrat. But he's also long harbored anti-elite inclinations, being skeptical of Wall Street and the economic policy establishment. He also rejected the foreign policy establishment's consensus on Afghanistan, advocating against a troop surge during the Obama administration and ordering full withdrawal once he was president himself.

And once in office with a narrow Democratic majority, like Walz, Biden wanted to go big with an FDR-sized agenda. (Walz had no pesky Senate filibuster rule or recalcitrant Joe Manchin to spoil things.) In office, Biden has mostly tried to keep his coalition happy, but when the politics looked dire on immigration this year, he did try to pivot to the center with new asylum restrictions.

So while Walz may be a new face, his political style and instincts may represent a good deal of continuity with the current president.

Correction, August 9, 3 pm ET: *A previous version of this story stated that Walz "successfully" pressured Minnesota legislators to carve out Mayo Clinic from a staffing level mandate. In fact, legislators ultimately dropped the proposed mandate for all hospitals.*

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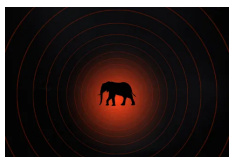

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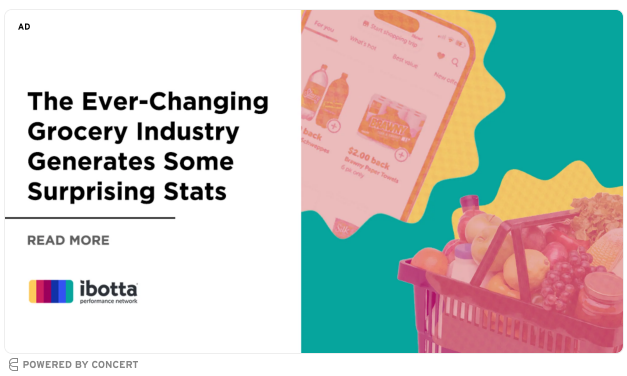

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