

The subject of climate-fueled disasters figured prominently in the vice presidential debate. The CBS News moderators asked a question about climate change within the first few minutes, although the multi-faceted answers weren't always factual and much of the post-debate discussion in newsrooms and spin room interviews centered on contentious yet civil exchanges on immigration and democracy.

Moderator Norah O'Donnell first posed the climate question this way: "Scientists say climate change makes these hurricanes larger, stronger, and more deadly because of the historic rainfall. Senator Vance, according to CBS News polling, 7 in 10 Americans and more than 60% of Republicans under the age of 45 favor the U.S. taking steps to try and reduce climate change. Senator, what responsibility would the Trump Administration have to try and reduce the impact of climate change?"

Vance began by addressing Hurricane Helene, calling it "an unbelievable, unspeakable human tragedy," stating that he knew some of these communities "very personally in Appalachia," and pledging that "when Donald Trump is President again, the government will put the citizens of this country first when they suffer from a disaster." Then, Vance deftly avoided stating whether he believes in the undeniable reality that climate change is largely caused by carbon emissions:

> ***VANCE:*** *"Norah, you asked about climate change, I think this is a very important issue, look, a lot of people are justifiably worried about all these crazy weather patterns. I think it's important for us, first of all, to say Donald Trump and I support clean air, clean water. We want the environment to be cleaner and safer, but one of the things that I've noticed, some of our Democratic friends talking a lot about, is a concern about carbon emissions, this idea that carbon emissions drives all the climate change. We'll let's just say that's true, just for the sake of argument so we're not arguing about weird science, let's just say that's true."*

Who would've guessed that Vance would say "weird" before Walz? By discussing anthropogenic climate change as a strange postulation rather than as an unequivocal fact, Vance implicitly aligns himself with climate change deniers without outright identifying with them, thus avoiding having to answer for their baseless beliefs. Vance then used that postulation to levy unfounded attacks on Vice President Harris's record on her own terms:

> ***VANCE: "****Well if you believe that, what would you want to do? The answer is you'd want to re-shore as much American manufacturing as possible and you'd want to produce as much energy as possible in the United States of America because we're the cleanest economy in the entire world. What have Kamala Harris's policies actually led to? More energy production in China, more manufacturing overseas, more doing business in some of the dirtiest parts of the entire world and when I say that I mean the amount of carbon emissions they're doing per unit of economic output. So if we actually care about getting cleaner air and cleaner water, the best thing to do is double-down and invest in American workers and the American people and, unfortunately, Kamala Harris has done exactly the opposite."*

Walz similarly began by discussing the "horrific tragedy" of Hurricane Helene and mentioning his service as the chair of the Democratic Governors Association and experience working with other governors to respond to emergencies, before addressing the question on climate change:

> ***WALZ: "****Now look, coming back to the climate change, there's no doubt [Hurricane Helene] roared onto the scene faster and stronger than anything we've seen. Sen. Vance has said there's a climate problem in the past; Donald Trump called it a hoax and then joked that these things would make more beachfront property to be able to invest in. What we've seen out of the Harris Administration—the Biden-Harris Administration—is we've seen this investment. We've seen massive investments, the biggest we've seen in global history we've seen in the Inflation Reduction Act, has created jobs all across the country. 2,000 in Jeffersonville, Ohio, taking the EV technology that we invented and making it here. 200,000 jobs across the country. The largest solar manufacturing plant in North America sits in Minnesota. But my farmers know climate change is real. They see 500-year droughts, 500-year floods, back to back. But what they're doing is adapting, and this has allowed them to tell me, 'Look, I harvest corn, I harvest soybean, and I harvest wind.' We're producing more natural gas and more oil at any time that we ever have. We're also producing more clean energy. So the solution for us is to continue to move forward, that climate change is real, reducing our impact is absolutely critical, but this is not a false choice. You can do that at the same time you're creating the jobs that we're seeing all across the country. That's exactly what this Administration has done. We are seeing us becoming an energy superpower for the future, not just the current. And that's what absolutely makes sense and we start thinking about how do we mitigate these disasters."*

Walz largely echoed Harris's longstanding talking points that frame the clean energy transition as a jobs program, justifying in both environmental and economic terms the unprecedented climate investments made by the Biden-Harris Administration in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Walz returned to this theme later in the debate, saying that he and Vance are "in agreement that we bring those [manufacturing jobs] home" but argued that "the issue is Donald Trump is talking about it, Kamala Harris has a record: 250,000 more manufacturing jobs just out of the IRA." However, Walz added his own Midwestern flair by citing the existential threat that climate change poses for American farmers. I'd expect nothing less from the most prominent member of the Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor Party

O'Donnell invited Vance's rebuttal by asking a follow-up question: "The Governor mentioned that President Trump has called climate change a 'hoax'—do you

agree?" As recently as last Sunday, Trump denied the reality of climate change yet again, at a rally in Erie, Pennsylvania: "They don't even talk about the environment anymore. You know why… It's one of the great scams of all time. You know why they don't talk about it? Because people aren't buying it anymore." As my UCLA Emmett Institute colleagues mentioned in a recent webinar event, one of the architects of Project 2025 also denied the reality of climate change last weekend. And here, Vance again refused to say whether he believes in climate change:

> ***VANCE:*** *"Well look, what the President has said is that… If the Democrats, in particular Kamala Harris and her leadership, if they really believed that climate change is serious, what they would be doing is more energy production and more manufacturing in the United States of America, and that's not what they're doing. So clearly Kamala Harris herself doesn't believe her own rhetoric on this. If she did, she would actually agree with Donald Trump's energy policies. Now, something Gov. Walz said that I think is important to touch upon… Because when we talk about clean energy, I think that's a slogan that often the Democrats will use here, and I'm talking of course about the Democratic leadership, and the real issue is that if you're spending hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars of American taxpayer money on solar panels that are made in China, number one, you're going to make the economy dirtier. We should be making more of those solar panels here in the United States of America."*

At this point, Walz interjected, saying "We are, in Minnesota" and Vance responded:

> ***VANCE: "****Some of them are, Tim, but a lot of them are being made overseas in China, especially the components that go into those solar panels. So if you really want to make the environment cleaner, you've got to invest in more energy production. We haven't built a nuclear facility, I think one, in the past 40 years. Natural gas, we've got to invest more in it. Kamala Harris has done the opposite. That's raised energy prices and also meant that we're doing worse by the climate."*

Walz responded by countering Vance's argument that Democrats haven't

sufficiently invested in energy production from all sources, fossil fuel and clean energy alike:

> ***WALZ:*** *"Well look, we're producing more natural gas than we ever have, there's no moratorium on that. We're producing more oil. But folks know… Like I said, these are not liberal folks, these are not folks that are Green New Deal folks. These are farmers that have been drought one year, massive flooding the next year. They understand that it makes sense. Look, our number one export cannot be topsoil from erosion from these massive storms. We saw it in Minnesota this summer. And thinking about how do we respond to that, we're thinking ahead on this. And what Kamala Harris has been able to do… In Minnesota, we're starting to weatherproof some of these things. The infrastructure law that was passed allows us to think about mitigation in the future. How do we make sure that we're protecting by burying our power lines? How do we make sure we're protecting lakefronts and things we're seeing more and more of? But to call it a 'hoax' and to take the oil company executives to Mar-a-Lago, say, 'Give me money for my campaign and I'll let you do whatever you want.' We can be smarter about that and an all-above energy policy is exactly what she's doing, creating those jobs right here."*

Walz's Mar-a-Lago reference was based on a *Washington Post* report that Trump asked oil CEOs to donate $1 billion while vowing to repeal Biden's policies that they oppose on issues including electric vehicles, clean energy, air pollution, and toxic chemicals. Other than that one clear jab, Walz focused more on touting the Biden-Harris Administration's accomplishments under the IRA than attacking Trump's record of harming the environment. While that is an understandable, forward-looking strategy, I wish Walz had made Vance answer for at least some of the damage done to the environment during the Trump Administration, which former Obama Administration speechwriter Jon Lovett eloquently recounted his *Lovett or Leave It* podcast on Tuesday: "As President, Trump tried to slash FEMA disaster response. As President, Trump responded to requests after natural disasters based on which governors were nice to him, and if Donald Trump is President again, he will appoint anti-climate zealots throughout the Administration with the singular goal to undermine, privatize, and disband the agencies that collect and report data on climate change… This is the less bombastic and more sophisticated grinding daily work of destroying the world, burrowed deep into the Federal Register—close

an office, cut a budget, slowly shift the terms of the debate—and this effort has worked."

Closing out the climate question, O'Donnell fact-checked Vance's climate change denialism, stating that "the overwhelming consensus among scientists is that the Earth's climate is warming at an unprecedented rate."

Vance later brought up energy policy in response to a question on housing, stating, "If you lower energy prices—as Donald Trump says, 'drill, baby, drill'—[that's] one of the biggest drivers of housing costs aside from illegal immigration" because "if a truck driver is paying 40% more for diesel, then the lumber he's delivering to the job site to build the house is also going to become a lot more expensive" so "if we open up American energy, you will get immediate price relief for American citizens." Vance also discussed building housing on federal lands, but didn't provide much detail on which federal lands he would "open up" to housing development and oil extraction. After pointing out Vance's lack of detail, Walz delivered an impassioned defense for protecting federal lands as non-commodified public goods:

> ***WALZ:*** *"I think when people hear federal lands, these are really important pieces of land. Now Minnesota doesn't have a lot of federal land, I know in the western part of the country we do. There's not a lot of federal land in and around Minneapolis, for example, so the issue is I don't understand the federal lands issue unless we see this, and I worry about this as somebody who cares deeply about our national parks and our federal lands, look, Minnesota, we protect these things, we've got about 20% of the world's fresh water. These lands protect, they're there for a reason, they belong to all of us, but again, this is when you view housing and you view these things as commodities, like, 'There's a chance to make money here, let's take this federal land and let's sell it to people for that.'"*

For context, the Biden-Harris Administration has limited oil drilling on some public lands, such as across 13 million acres in Alaska, but in general, domestic oil production "has picked up the pace under Biden, who had approved more permits for oil and gas drilling on public lands by October [2023] than former President Donald Trump had by the same point in his presidency." In the preceding presidential debate, Harris forcefully defended the Biden-Harris Administration's boosting of domestic oil production as a conscious choice to avoid "over-rely[ing] on

foreign oil." In contrast, Walz spoke at length and in personal terms about protecting public lands instead of opining on whether domestic oil drilling should be expanded or reduced.

In their closing statements, only Vance touched on environmental policy. He said, "one of the issues we didn't talk about was energy," which, as evidenced by the analysis above, was not true. Vance continued to draw the connection between U.S. "energy independence" and affordability:

> ***VANCE:*** *"And I remember when I was being raised by my grandmother, when she didn't have enough money to turn on the heat some nights because Ohio gets pretty cold at night and because money was often very tight. And I believe as a person who wants to be your next Vice President, that we are a rich and prosperous enough country where every American, whether they're rich or poor, ought to be able to turn on their heat in the middle of a cold, winter night. That's gotten more difficult thanks to Kamala Harris's energy policies."*

Looking beyond just the climate-related responses, I found it telling that Vance repeatedly referred to the current Administration as "the Kamala Harris Administration" in an attempt to tie Harris to the perceived struggles of the Biden-Harris Administration. In fact, in Walz's first response, he mimicked Vance's phrase, calling the current Administration "the Harris Administration" before correcting himself and saying "the Biden-Harris Administration." The rhetorical battle over which of their tickets boasted the "change candidates" continued throughout the night after being a running theme in the Harris-Trump debate.

Pundits asserted that Walz missed an opportunity to pivot from a question about his past false statements about the timing of his trip to China and Hong Kong in 1989 to an attack on Trump's incessant and well-documented pattern of lying. While being interviewed by NBC News on Walz's debate performance, Sen. Amy Klobuchar demonstrated how her fellow Minnesotan could've given a more direct answer to the question about his 1989 trip to China and Hong Kong, responding that Walz "made an error, he admitted he made an error, unlike Donald Trump who wouldn't even admit that Joe Biden won the election," and clarifying that Walz did visit China and Hong Kong the same year as the Tiananmen Square massacre and was only "a few months off." However, I think that Walz would've been best served by pivoting

to *Vance's own misstatements* just minutes prior about Trump's record of assailing the overwhelmingly-popular Affordable Care Act. Specifically, Vance said that Trump attempted to "salvage" the Affordable Care Act when, in reality, Trump "cut millions of dollars in marketing and enrollment aid for the law's health plans and backed failed congressional and legal efforts to overturn the law."

Another one of Vance's misstatements that Walz could've pivoted to was Vance's denial that he ever supported a national ban on abortion—"I never supported a national ban, I did during, when I was running for Senate in 2022, talk about setting some minimum national standard"—despite having said on the record, in no uncertain terms, "I certainly would like abortion to be illegal nationally." Walz could have benefited from going on the offensive and calling out Vance's extreme positions on abortion—one of his ticket's best-polling issues—as well as the implications of those positions on assisted reproductive technology, which enabled Walz and his wife Gwen to have children. Walz's speech recounting his family's struggle with infertility resonated with audiences at the DNC, and this debate provided an excellent opportunity to share that moving personal story with a broader audience that extends beyond the Democratic base that tuned into his convention speech. Support for assisted reproductive technology crosses party lines, with "53 percent of Republicans" responding that they "think fertility planning like IVF should be easier to access." Although the Trump-Vance campaign has attempted to distance itself from the most vociferous critics of assisted reproductive technology, Walz could have backed Vance into a corner by asking him whether he agrees with "fetal personhood"—the legal theory that, as law professors Melissa Murray and Kate Shaw phrased it, "a fetus is a person entitled to the same rights and protections as any other person." For adherents of fetal personhood, "any act that involves reproduction may implicate fetal rights" and "fetal personhood thus has strong potential to raise questions about access to abortion, contraception and various forms of assisted reproductive technology, including I.V.F." Walz could have forced Vance to either (1) disavow fetal personhood, thus dampening the enthusiasm of evangelical anti-abortion hardliners who may be wishing Trump chose one of their own as VP like he did by choosing Mike Pence in 2016, or (2) endorse the fringe legal theory and undermine recent GOP messaging that Democrats are exaggerating the threat of I.V.F. bans "as a scare tactic," as Sen. Katie Britt (R-AL) asserted on Fox News earlier this week.