

## If You Like Tim Walz's Earthy Politics, You Should Know About Paul Wellstone

Sept. 15, 2024, 6:00 a.m. ET



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**By Ross Barkan**

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Since he became Kamala Harris's running mate, Tim Walz has attracted attention for his folksy charm, his life as a football coach and in the Army National Guard — and his innate ability, in a party that can seem stodgy and elite, to speak to Americans from any walk of life.

Less discussed, but plenty relevant, is his connection to an icon of Minnesota politics who today is no longer on the minds of many Americans. Had he not died in a plane crash 22 years ago, Paul Wellstone might still be in the U.S. Senate. Before Bernie Sanders rose to national prominence as a leader of the progressive left, there was Mr. Wellstone, the jovial maverick from Minnesota who [campaigned](#) in a clattering green school bus, turned up to campaign events in work shirts and jeans, and preferred staying in people's homes to hotels.

As a senator, Mr. Wellstone was resolutely antiwar, pro-labor and supportive of the expansive social democracy that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal made possible. He belonged, first and foremost, to the legacy of left-of-center Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party senators who counted Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey among their leading lights.

Yet he was also one of a kind, pointing the way forward for a Democratic Party that would, in the last decades of the 20th century, fall prey to the siren songs of austerity and deregulation.

It is the Wellstone tradition of left-populism, once so central to the Democratic Party's brand, that must be recovered. Elements of it have found something of a second wind in the Biden era. It was big government liberalism free of pretension and hectoring — stylistically unlike the sort found on both coasts — and never enervated by the academy. The airy language and exclusionary posture of the faculty lounge was not found in his earthy politics.

Mr. Walz's presence on the presidential ticket is evidence, perhaps, that the Wellstone tradition might not get left behind in the 2020s, even as the billionaires who fund the Democrats [demand policies](#) that are much friendlier to them.

None of Mr. Wellstone's populism was an affectation. Unlike John Fetterman, the hoodie-clad Pennsylvania senator who grew up in suburban affluence, Mr. Wellstone was the child of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants and won a wrestling scholarship to the University of North Carolina, where he starred in the Atlantic Coast Conference. He later earned his doctorate from U.N.C. and became a political science professor at Carleton College in Minnesota.



Credit...Andy King/Associated Press

Even there, he was rough-hewed and unconventional, eschewing publishing in academic journals. Carleton almost dismissed him, but his students rallied to his defense, and in 1974 he became the youngest professor in the school's history to receive tenure.

It was in political organizing where Mr. Wellstone most thrived. His theory of change was straightforward: the “Wellstone triangle,” as it would [later be called](#) by those who ran the organizing nonprofit that sprung up in Minnesota, after Mr. Wellstone’s death, to carry on his political vision. Mr. Walz, a high school social studies teacher with his eyes on a Republican-held House seat, became an alum of Camp Wellstone two decades ago.

The triangle, Mr. Walz and others would learn, was running electoral campaigns, grass-roots organizing and devising public policy. Mr. Wellstone cared greatly about all three. He would argue that electoral politics without community organizing was a politics absent a base, and community organizing without electoral politics was a marginalized politics. In turn, community organizing and electoral politics without a clear and obvious public policy agenda was a politics without direction.

At heart, Mr. Wellstone was an activist and found local renown in the 1970s and 1980s working with farmers, students and the poor, knitting together coalitions that would force the political class to pay attention to them. He helped start the Organization for a Better Rice County, an advocacy group for impoverished rural residents, partnering with poor women on welfare. Some of his causes, like bolstering public education, were embraced by Mr. Walz when he became governor.

After an unsuccessful run for state auditor in 1982 and a stint as a Minnesota state campaign co-chair of Jesse Jackson’s 1988 presidential campaign, Mr. Wellstone ran for the Senate in 1990. Like Mr. Jackson, he aimed to develop multiracial and cross-class coalitions. Though he was an academic, he never condescended to voters and stumped tirelessly across the state. Heavily outspent by the incumbent, the Republican Rudy Boschwitz, Mr. Wellstone pulled off a dramatic upset. His campaign effectively organized the poor, young people and racial minorities who had been ignored by Minnesotans of both political parties. He also used humor, producing a quirky ad that was a pastiche of the 1989 Michael Moore documentary “Roger & Me.”

One of his final votes, and perhaps the most politically charged of his career, was his decision to [oppose](#) the Iraq War in 2002. He also cast a vote against the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, which once enforced a separation between investment and commercial banking and helped ward off the kind of economic crash that would severely damage the nation in 2008, six years after Mr. Wellstone’s death.

There's much talk, today, of political organizing. Many elected officials, particularly on the left, proclaim that they do it, and there are no shortage of nonprofit and political groups that espouse an ironclad commitment to canvassing, knocking on doors and meeting people where they are. But the kind of durable, decades-long organizing that Mr. Wellstone practiced is in short supply, and most in politics only associate it with campaign season.

For left-populism to win, particularly in the rural counties where Republicans have made enormous gains over the last decade, organizing will have to take on the verve and tenor of Mr. Wellstone's efforts. It will need to penetrate deep into communities that have been left behind, and remain there. No constituency was too small for Mr. Wellstone; the Hmong people were among those the senator courted, and his death [devastated](#) the first Hmong politician in America to ever secure a legislative seat.

Mr. Walz did not have Mr. Wellstone's history of community organizing when he entered Congress and eventually got himself elected governor, but he has been, in office, a progressive of the same spirit, and has been unabashed about defending the liberal legislation the Democratic legislature sent to his desk to sign. What Mr. Walz does also have, like Mr. Wellstone, is a deep appreciation for labor unions — one that has come back into vogue in the national Democratic Party. In his first solo appearance as a candidate for vice president, he flew to Los Angeles to appear before the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Winning this November and in future elections, for the left, will mean championing the causes that animated Mr. Wellstone — believing in muscular, effective governance that safeguards the working class and poor, and does not allow the richest corporations to exploit them. The language for Mr. Wellstone's final campaign ad, which he helped write, could serve as a clarion call for the Harris-Walz ticket desperate to vanquish Donald Trump.

"I don't represent the big oil companies, I don't represent the big pharmaceutical companies, I don't represent the Enrons of this world," Mr. Wellstone said. "But you know what, they already have great representation in Washington. It's the rest of the people that need it."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/15/opinion/tim-walz-paul-wellstone.html>