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Beshear, Vance spat over Appalachia oversimplifies the region, experts say



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A public spat between Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance and Democratic vice presidential hopeful Andy Beshear has put Appalachia in the spotlight, with some asking who gets to claim the region's identity.

But as the two trade jabs, it's unclear what effect the debate could have on election outcomes — or whether the Kentucky governor's recent attacks will be enough to earn him a spot on the Democratic ticket.

Last week, Beshear used his time in two national media appearances as well as a trip through Eastern Kentucky to publicly question Vance's commitment to Appalachia, where the Ohio senator has family ties, saying Vance "ain't from here" and referring to him as "phony" and "fake."

The comments came as Beshear is reportedly on the list of possible running mates for presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris.

Several of Beshear's statements were aimed at Vance's best-selling but controversial 2016 memoir about the region, "Hillbilly Elegy," which drew ire from critics who thought the book portrayed Appalachians as lazy and oversimplified the complex history of the area.

But scholars and people from Appalachia told The Courier Journal the Vance-Beshear standoff also oversimplifies the region, which spans states and ideologies.

So who is an Appalachian? And what role will the region play in the upcoming election?

Who are Andy Beshear and JD Vance?

Vance was born and raised in Middletown, Ohio, which is not considered part of Appalachia, but has family ties to Breathitt County, Kentucky, which is part of Appalachia.

Vance visited family there while growing up and eventually went on to become a Yale graduate and venture capitalist.

Kentucky's Beshear does not claim to be from Appalachia. The second term governor was born in Louisville and raised in Lexington. Still, like Vance, he has ties to the region.

Following 2022's devastating floods that killed 45 people in Eastern Kentucky, Beshear was a frequent presence on the ground. And last year, he served as the states' co-chair at the Appalachian Regional Commission, a federal-state-local governmental entity that tries to strengthen the economy of the region.

Who is Appalachian? Where is Appalachia?

The Courier Journal spoke to several Appalachian scholars, who all said there is no one definition of who an Appalachian is or the exact boundaries of the region.

The sole official definition comes from the Appalachian Regional Commission, which identifies 423 counties across 13 states with a population of 26 million as making up the region, said Dwight Billings, a retired professor of sociology at the University of Kentucky, who spent his career studying Appalachia.

But the question of who is or isn't Appalachian is more complex than that, Billings and others said.

For one thing, the region has seen many people leave for better educational and economic opportunities.

“There's a significant outmigration from Appalachia, that always has been for a long time. And sometimes the identity is stronger among those who leave than those who stay,” Billings said. “Maybe that's because, you know, you've given up something when you go to a new place, you think more about where you came from and what that identity has meant.”

Take Michael Maloney, for example. The 83-year-old is originally from Breathitt County, and his journey was similar to that of Vance's family. He left and moved to the Cincinnati area, where he has spent his life helping organize Appalachians living in urban places.

Maloney said he dislikes Vance's political views but does not think the Ohio senator should be criticized for claiming an Appalachian heritage.

“When people deny Vance's heritage, they're denying ... the heritages of millions of people. There are more people living outside of the Appalachian region than are living in it,” Maloney said. “You can call him a traitor to his heritage, but don't try to take his heritage away.”

Vance's experience of spending time visiting his family in Appalachia is a quintessential part of the Appalachian experience, Maloney added.

“That's part of the concept of the ‘hillbilly highway’ ... it wasn't just a road that you use to get out of the mountains, you used it to go back and visit your relatives,” Maloney said, pointing out that for many who left the region for economic reasons, visits home helped reinforced family ties and cultural identities.

Middletown, Ohio, where Vance was born, was known as an Appalachian city, Maloney said. And Middletown City Council member Steve West says that influence can still be felt.

“A lot of people in our area have roots that tie down into West Virginia, Kentucky, parts of Tennessee,” West said. “Many of us spent time in the country when we were young.”

Kentucky author Silas House said Beshear's quip about Vance's origins was not about Vance being from Appalachia but rather about Vance not being from Kentucky, at all.

He said when he thinks back to the floods in Eastern Kentucky, Vance was not present to help people while Beshear was there frequently.

Both Maloney and Phil Obermiller, another sociologist of Appalachia, said people should be allowed to self-identify — even Vance.

“If he (Vance) wants to express an identity as an Appalachian, why shouldn't he?”

Obermiller said. “The other side of the coin is does he speak for Appalachians? No, he speaks for himself and his family in terms of his writing. ... I don't think anybody speaks for Appalachia.”

Is there an Appalachian vote? What role does Appalachia play in politics?

If categorizing Appalachia is hard, it's also hard to quantify exactly how many people who identify as Appalachian are voters and how they'll cast their ballots, experts said.

“There's not a uniform thing out there called an Appalachian vote,” Billings said. “It's very complex.”

“I don't think there is an Appalachian vote,” agreed Obermiller. “We're talking about 25 million people in the ARC region, you think they all go to the polls and do the same thing?”

But Appalachia does play a significant role in American politics.

The issues Appalachia faces are similar to those seen in other parts of the country, said Tony Harkins, a professor at Western Kentucky University who co-edited a book in response to Vance's memoir.

“Debating Appalachia likely serves as a code word for debating white poverty,” University of Kentucky political scientist Stephen Voss said. “Yes, it's one region with one particular variant of white poverty, but an audience hearing Beshear and Vance debate the best path to end white poverty are engaging in a policy debate with residents much wider than Appalachia.”

House, the author, agrees: “For a lot of people, the idea of Appalachia is equal to the idea of the working class. Appalachia is really sort of an indicator for much more of the country than the Appalachian region.”

Vance has sought to capitalize on that in his responses to Beshear.

“JD grew up spending his summers in Appalachia and came from a poor family. Beshear is an out of touch elitist who grew up with a silver spoon,” Vance spokeswoman Taylor Van Kirk said, pointing to Beshear’s father’s career as a politician and the fact that the younger Beshear worked at the same law firms his father had.

“Beshear will never relate to working people in the heartland because he had everything handed to him and never had to struggle. Senator Vance has had to earn everything he’s accomplished in his life,” Van Kirk said.

Could Beshear provide a counterweight to Vance?

Vance has so far tried to focus his campaign on bringing in Midwestern voters, as indicated in his Republican National Convention speech, historian Harkins said. Kentucky is a less important focus for him because the GOP is very likely to win the state’s votes no matter who the nominees is.

Beshear, meanwhile, has emphasized his commitment to the Appalachian part of Kentucky, as, for example, during a daylong tour of the region Friday to commemorate the two-year anniversary of devastating floods there.

Beshear being on the ticket is not likely to turn the Bluegrass blue, Harkins and other experts said. Still, he could help Democrats pick up votes in other key states.

White voters from a relatively low socioeconomic status are “the key to the Trump phenomenon,” Voss said, and “and if Andy Beshear could help Kamala Harris make any inroads into that core of the Trump base, eroding the landslide majorities Trump needs among that constituency, he would make a real difference to the ticket.”

“So far as Beshear can help pivot the clash to an to an economic domain, then he has distracted voters from the main liabilities that are hindering or are hampering the Democratic effort right now — immigration is the big one,” Voss added.

But Vance could also help pull in key voters in Ohio, said Maloney, the Appalachian activist who lives in Cincinnati.

“I would say that (among) people in Ohio, both rural and urban Appalachians and others, for that matter, that Vance has a strong following and he will keep that strong following,” Maloney said. “Some like his political ideas because there's a strong antigovernment mood in Appalachia right now.”

Author House, however, thinks Beshear would trounce Vance in a debate.

“He knows Kentucky people back and forth,” House said. “He’s been a tremendous governor for all Kentucky and has exhibited such empathy.”

There are some who hope that additional attention to the region does not overemphasize the partisan differences.

"Our fear in the region is that Appalachia will yet again be weaponized to score partisan ideological points, rather than fostering a real understanding of the systemic and structural challenges we face, including those born from a history of extraction," said Ryan Eller, executive director of the Appalachian Funders Network. "Our region, because of our culture and history, isn't overly partisan or monolithic. Instead, we are deeply community-focused and worker-focused."

"We Appalachian folks have grit and a unique story to tell about collaboration," Eller added, "regardless of someone's politics."

Haley BeMiller contributed.

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