

J.D. Vance: From *Hillbilly Elegy* to Political Power



Official portrait of J.D. Vance, Vice President of the United States (2025).

Early Life and *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016)

J.D. Vance was born in 1984 and raised in Middletown, Ohio, a once-thriving manufacturing town where his family faced economic hardship and instability ¹. After high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and served a tour in Iraq in 2005 ². Vance later used the GI Bill to attend Ohio State University, excelling academically and earning admission to Yale Law School ³. He graduated Yale in 2013, where he met his future wife, Usha, and then worked briefly at a corporate law firm ⁴.

It was during this period that Vance decided to write a memoir about his upbringing in a poor, white working-class family from Appalachia. In 2016 he published *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, which catapulted him to national attention ⁵. The book tells the story of his family's struggles with poverty and addiction, and it struck a chord during the 2016 election year. Media and critics initially **praised *Hillbilly Elegy*** as an "urgent," insightful sociological text that helped explain the frustrations of the rural white working class who were powering Donald Trump's rise ⁶ ⁷. Vance was seen as a **compelling messenger** from "Trump country," providing an insider's perspective on the "forgotten Americans" of the Rust Belt ⁸ ⁹. The memoir became a bestseller, a college reading staple, and even inspired a 2020 Hollywood film adaptation by Ron Howard.

However, in retrospect *Hillbilly Elegy's* glowing reception cooled as Vance's public persona evolved. By 2024, some observers pointed out that Vance "*burst onto the scene*" as a very **different figure in 2016** – even expressing humility in the book's introduction that it was "absurd" he, a non-politician, should write such a

book ¹⁰ . With Vance later pursuing a political career, many came to view the memoir as “*designed as a springboard into politics*” ¹¹ . *The Washington Post* noted that within a few years, “*everyone just turned on [the book]*” – critics across the political spectrum found its analysis too simplistic and suspected Vance of using it to launch political ambitions ¹² ¹¹ . Notably, by 2024 Vance’s own rhetoric had diverged sharply from the book’s tone. In 2016, *Hillbilly Elegy* placed some responsibility on Vance’s community for its troubles (an “up by the bootstraps” message), whereas on the 2024 campaign trail Vance cast his supporters as *victims* of outside forces like neoliberal elites – “*a complete U-turn from the moral of the story of ‘Hillbilly Elegy’*,” one columnist observed ¹³ . As another critic put it, “*All the qualities that made Hillbilly Elegy one of the best books I read in 2016... have been shamelessly jettisoned by Vance for the sake of his political career. Nowhere in the book does Vance express concerns about immigrants... or the perfidy of the deep state*” ¹⁴ . In short, the memoir’s initial moment of acclaim has been reinterpreted in light of Vance’s later shift in values and objectives.

Venture Capital and the Thiel Connection (2017–2019)

Vance’s transition from author to political figure was not immediate. In 2017, shortly after his book’s success, he moved to Silicon Valley to work in venture capital. Tech billionaire **Peter Thiel** – known for his libertarian and nationalist leanings – became a pivotal mentor and backer. Thiel **hired Vance in 2017** to work at his investment firm, Mithril Capital, while Vance was still finishing *Hillbilly Elegy* ¹⁵ . This marked the start of a long-running alliance. Vance has described first encountering Thiel at Yale Law when Thiel gave a talk linking America’s technological stagnation to the decline of its elites – an event Vance later called “*the most significant moment*” of his time at Yale ¹⁶ . Thiel’s iconoclastic ideas clearly resonated with Vance’s emerging worldview.

After a couple of years in California, Vance refocused on his home state of Ohio. In **2019, he returned to Ohio and co-founded a venture capital firm**, named Narya Capital, aimed at funding Midwestern startups. Unsurprisingly, Thiel and a cadre of tech elites provided significant seed money for Vance’s fund ¹⁷ ¹⁸ . (Investors reportedly included Thiel, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, and others.) By this point, Vance was openly flirting with running for public office, and Thiel encouraged him ¹⁸ . The **financial and professional boost from Thiel** not only made Vance wealthy – *Forbes* estimates Vance’s net worth around **\$10 million** today, thanks to lucrative investments and royalties ¹⁹ – but also gave him an entry into influential conservative networks.

This “**follow the money**” trail is illuminating. Thiel in particular has been Vance’s most **consequential benefactor**, both in business and politics ²⁰ . Thiel’s motives have been subject to speculation. A billionaire tech pioneer (co-founder of PayPal and Palantir) with openly skeptical views about democracy – he once wrote “*I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible*” ²¹ – Thiel has been accused of seeking **ideological influence** in government. Having an ally like Vance in power could advance Thiel’s techno-libertarian, nationalist ideas or protect his business interests under friendly policy. “*Thiel’s interests in having Vance in office are not explicit, but there’s no question he has business interests that could be benefited by having someone like J.D. Vance in his corner*,” observed an OpenSecrets investigator in 2024 ²² ²³ . In short, from venture capital to politics, **Thiel’s patronage was the rocket fuel** for Vance’s ascent.

Political Reawakening and Changing Positions (2016 vs. 2020–2022)

When *Hillbilly Elegy* was released, J.D. Vance was **not** a Trump supporter. In fact, during the 2016 campaign Vance described himself as a “*Never Trump guy*” and publicly called Donald Trump “*reprehensible*,” “*noxious*,”

and “an idiot” ²⁴ . He even privately likened Trump to “an American Hitler,” according to messages later revealed ²⁵ . This early stance positioned Vance as a moderate conservative commentator critical of Trump’s temperament and populist style.

Over the next few years, however, Vance’s political orientation underwent a **dramatic reversal**. By 2020, as Trump’s hold on the Republican base solidified, Vance began to **shift his positions** to align with the rising “America First” wing. He publicly **reversed his view of Trump**, ultimately embracing the former president. Vance also started voicing the grievances and conspiratorial narratives prevalent among Trump’s base. Notably, he became a **vocal denier of the 2020 election results**, promoting the unfounded belief that Joe Biden’s victory was illegitimate ²⁶ . This was a striking turn for someone who once positioned himself as a principled critic of Trump.

Several factors drove Vance’s volte-face. For one, **political ambition** – as he eyed a Senate run in Ohio, he needed the support of Trump’s loyal voter base. Vance himself admitted that if he were to run as a Republican in Ohio, “*being anti-Trump is toxic*”. Additionally, his **circle of mentors and friends** pulled him rightward. As detailed above, Peter Thiel and other “New Right” influencers were in his ear, advocating nationalist and anti-establishment ideas. By the time Vance launched his campaign for U.S. Senate in 2021, he had fully reinvented himself as an “**America First**” **conservative**, railing against elites, immigration, and alleged left-wing influence – themes far removed from his 2016 persona ¹⁴ .

In practical terms, this **ideological makeover paid off**. Vance aggressively sought Trump’s endorsement for the open Ohio Senate seat in 2022. He **won Trump over**: reports indicate that Vance’s loyalty and newly minted MAGA bona fides, plus a friendship he cultivated with Donald Trump Jr., secured the coveted endorsement ²⁷ ²⁸ . Backed by Trump’s blessing, Vance went on to win the crowded Republican primary and then the general election in November 2022, defeating Democrat Tim Ryan by about 6 percentage points ²⁹ ³⁰ . This victory marked Vance’s first elected office and solidified his transformation from **Trump critic to Trump-aligned populist**.

Campaign Finance: “Follow the Money”

From the outset of Vance’s Senate run, **money and megadonor support** were key. A **flood of Silicon Valley and conservative billionaire cash** powered his campaign, much of it traceable to Peter Thiel’s network. Thiel himself poured a staggering **\$15 million** into a pro-Vance Super PAC in 2022 ²⁰ ³¹ . (For context, single donors rarely invest that heavily in a Senate race.) This huge infusion helped Vance overcome better-known primary rivals in advertising and ground game. Thiel’s influence didn’t stop there: he quietly funneled additional funds to Vance via a dark-money nonprofit called Per Aspera Policy (at least \$200,000 more, as reported by the *Kansas City Star*) ³² . Other billionaire families of the far-right – **Mercer, Uihlein, Lindner**, etc. – also chipped in hundreds of thousands to Vance’s Super PAC ³³ . In short, a who’s-who of **ultra-wealthy Republican donors** bankrolled Vance’s rise ³⁴ .

What did these financiers expect in return? While no explicit quid pro quo is documented, Thiel and company clearly saw Vance as a vehicle for their ideas. Thiel’s own writings argue that America’s democratic system is broken and that “*some form of authoritarianism*” might better serve freedom ²¹ . Having a close ally in the Senate – and later, a heartbeat from the presidency – potentially gives this clique a friendly decision-maker on the inside. Watchdog groups have voiced concern that Thiel’s **business interests** (from defense contracts for his company Palantir to tech regulation issues) could benefit from Vance’s influence ²² . Indeed, Thiel has a history of converting donations into influence; he played a notable role in staffing

Trump's first administration with Silicon Valley acolytes after 2016 ³⁵ . Vance, for his part, has championed causes that dovetail with his patrons' interests, such as **attacking Big Tech censorship**, fighting "woke" policies, and opposing foreign wars that the nationalists abhor.

Beyond Thiel, Vance has continued to court wealthy benefactors. In 2023–24, as a freshman senator, he was instrumental in organizing high-dollar fundraisers for Trump's presidential comeback. For example, Vance helped host a **\$12 million fundraiser for Trump in June 2024** that brought in venture capital moguls like **David Sacks** and **Chamath Palihapitiya** ³⁶ . (Notably, Sacks had earlier personally given \$1 million to Vance's own PAC ³⁷ .) Vance's ability to straddle the worlds of tech billionaires and Trump's base made him an unusual **bridge between populism and plutocracy**. This is one reason the Trump campaign valued him: he could tap donor money that might otherwise shy away from Trump. As CBS News observed, Vance had *"assiduously courted billionaires and Silicon Valley titans to bankroll his unlikely rise"*, showing that **money in politics remains king** ³⁸ ³⁹ .

On the **personal finance** side, J.D. Vance's wealth has increased markedly thanks to these ventures. Public disclosures show he has **millions in assets**. By 2023, Vance reported total assets between \$4.1 million and \$11.8 million, including about **\$4 million in real estate** (multiple homes in Ohio, D.C., and Virginia) and significant investment holdings ⁴⁰ ⁴¹ . He continued to earn royalties from *Hillbilly Elegy* (\$55,000 in 2023, on top of \$121,000 the year before) as the book sold nearly 2 million copies by 2024 ⁴² ⁴³ . He also retained stakes in venture funds he managed and even cryptocurrency investments ⁴¹ . By *Forbes'* estimate, the **"hillbilly" became a deca-millionaire**, with a net worth around **\$10 million** by mid-2024 ¹⁹ . This affluence stands in contrast to the poverty he chronicled in his memoir – a fact not lost on commentators who note that Vance's success has firmly placed him among the elite circles he once analyzed as an outsider ¹⁹ .

Embrace of Trump and MAGA Alliance

Having secured a Senate seat with Trump's endorsement, Vance emerged in 2023 as one of Trump's most **loyal and aggressive allies** on Capitol Hill. He consistently positioned himself on the **MAGA wing** of the Republican Party ⁴⁴ . In the Senate, Vance made headlines by echoing Trumpist positions: he opposed further aid to Ukraine in the war against Russia, aligning with the "America First" isolationist stance, and he frequently attacked the Biden administration on immigration and law enforcement issues. Vance also did not shy away from Trump's personal battles – for instance, he showed up at Trump's civil trial in New York in 2023 as a show of support ²⁷ . All of this bolstered Vance's standing with Trump's inner circle. Donald Trump Jr. in particular became a close friend of Vance, reportedly lobbying his father to consider Vance for higher office ²⁷ .

The culmination of this partnership came in mid-2024. In July, former President Trump announced **J.D. Vance as his running mate** for the 2024 election ⁴⁵ . The choice was remarkable: Vance was a first-term senator and a newcomer to electoral politics, but Trump valued his intellect, his aggressive defense of Trump's agenda, and his appeal to Rust Belt voters. Moreover, Vance's connections to wealthy tech investors were viewed as an asset to the campaign's fundraising (especially at a time when some traditional GOP donors were wary of Trump) ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ . By selecting Vance, Trump was doubling down on the nationalist, populist themes both men espoused. Vance, for his part, had completed his political about-face – from a "Never Trump" outsider in 2016 to being **one heartbeat away from the presidency** on a Trump ticket in 2024. As the official White House bio now puts it, Trump *"extended J.D. the incredible honor"* of the VP nomination, and Vance *"looks forward to serving with President Trump... to Make America Great Again"* ⁴⁸ .

Vance's closeness to Trump also meant embracing Trump's most **controversial stances**. On the campaign trail as VP nominee, Vance amplified Trump's false claims about the 2020 election. For example, he repeatedly refused to say that Trump lost the 2020 race and even suggested *"big tech rigged the election"* in Biden's favor ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ . In October 2024, Vance finally went so far as to claim that *"Donald Trump didn't lose"* in 2020 – a **baseless denial of the election outcome** that drew significant media attention ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ . This solidified his role as a loyal adherent to Trump's narrative, willing to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. elections to maintain fidelity to Trump. Trump himself noted that loyalty as a key reason for picking Vance, with opponents saying *"Trump selected Vance for this exact reason – he knows Vance will be a loyal soldier in Trump's pursuit for absolute, unchecked, limitless power"* ⁵¹ . The once-independent-minded memoirist had become, as one profile put it, *"an ardent and effective defender of Trump, putting an intellectual gloss on [Trump's] raw MAGA populism."* ⁵²

Timeline of Major Events in Vance's Life and Career

- **1984:** J.D. Vance is born in Middletown, Ohio, and raised by his grandparents in a struggling working-class family ¹ .
- **2003–2007:** Enlists in the **U.S. Marine Corps** after high school; serves for four years, including a deployment to Iraq in 2005 ² .
- **2007–2013:** Attends **Ohio State University** on the GI Bill, then **Yale Law School** (graduates in 2013). Meets his future wife, Usha, at Yale ³ .
- **2016:** Publishes *Hillbilly Elegy*, which becomes a bestseller and cultural phenomenon. Gains national prominence as a commentator on Appalachian poverty amid Trump's election ⁵ . At this time, Vance is an outspoken **Trump critic**, calling Trump "reprehensible" and "noxious" ²⁴ .
- **2017:** Moves to Silicon Valley; **joins Peter Thiel's Mithril Capital** as an investor while working on the book's publicity ¹⁵ .
- **2019:** Returns to Ohio and **launches Narya Capital**, a Cincinnati-based venture capital fund, backed by Peter Thiel and other tech investors ¹⁷ . Begins publicly mulling a run for office.
- **2020:** As Trump contests the presidential election results, Vance **shifts to the right**, voicing skepticism of the 2020 outcome and adopting "America First" positions. He privately meets Trump for the first time in early 2021 (arranged by Thiel) to build a rapport ⁵³ .
- **July 1, 2021:** **Announces candidacy** for U.S. Senate in Ohio (to succeed retiring Sen. Rob Portman). Vance, once anti-Trump, now aggressively seeks Trump's endorsement.
- **April 2022:** **Trump endorses Vance** in the GOP primary after Vance pledges loyalty to the MAGA agenda. Thiel contributes heavily to a pro-Vance Super PAC (ultimately \$15 million) ³¹ .
- **May 2022:** Vance **wins the Republican primary** for Senate, surprising many establishment Republicans, thanks in part to Trump's backing and heavy Super PAC spending ³¹ .
- **Nov 8, 2022:** Elected **U.S. Senator from Ohio**, defeating Democrat Tim Ryan by about 6 points ²⁹ . Vance, at 38, enters the Senate as a freshman aligned with the Trump-aligned wing.
- **2023:** Builds a profile in the Senate as a **hard-right populist**. Opposes bipartisan measures like continued Ukraine aid, and proposes culture-war legislation (e.g. a federal ban on gender-affirming care for minors ⁵⁴). Also converts to Catholicism (a faith alignment common among "post-liberal" conservatives he associates with).
- **July 15, 2024:** Trump **announces J.D. Vance as his running mate** for the 2024 presidential election ⁴⁵ . Vance, age 39, becomes the Republican nominee for Vice President. Shortly after, investigations reveal Vance follows and engages with far-right figures on social media, sparking controversy (see below).

- **Nov 5, 2024:** Trump and Vance win the **2024 presidential election** (defeating the Democratic ticket). Vance is elected the 50th Vice President of the United States. (*Congress formally certified Trump's victory in early 2025*) ⁵⁵.
- **Jan 20, 2025:** J.D. Vance is **inaugurated as Vice President** of the United States at age 40 – one of the youngest ever to hold the office ⁵⁶.

Controversies: Anti-Democratic and Extremist Associations

As Vance's politics have shifted, critics have scrutinized him for **anti-democratic tendencies** and ties to far-right or white nationalist ideas. Several pieces of evidence support these concerns:

- **Election Denialism:** Vance's stance on the 2020 election raised alarms about his commitment to democracy. He consistently **refused to affirm** that Joe Biden won legitimately and propagated the false claim that the election was "rigged." In a 2024 interview, Vance answered "*Did Donald Trump lose the election? Not by the words that I would use*", insisting that "serious problems" marred 2020 ⁴⁹. He argued that "big tech" and the media had "**rigged the election**" by suppressing negative stories about Biden ⁵⁰. Even more striking, Vance mused on a podcast that if he were in Mike Pence's shoes on January 6, 2021, he would have **tried to throw out Biden's electors** – effectively advocating overturning the election ⁵⁷. This alignment with Trump's attempted subversion of the democratic process is a key example of anti-democratic behavior. Indeed, Vance *downplayed the January 6th insurrection* as well ⁵⁸. His rhetoric suggests a willingness to **undermine electoral integrity** in pursuit of partisan ends.
- **"New Right" Authoritarian Ideas:** Vance has increasingly affiliated with the intellectual "New Right" or "post-liberal" movement, which often critiques liberal democracy and champions a more authoritarian approach to achieve conservative goals. In December 2023, Vance spoke at the launch of a book called *Up from Conservatism*, a manifesto by the far-right Claremont Institute network ⁵⁹ ⁶⁰. The book explicitly advocates **radical measures**: repealing the Civil Rights Act, investigating "the gay lifestyle," defunding colleges and childcare, and encouraging traditional male-dominated families ⁶¹ ⁶². Vance **praised the book as "great"** and delivered a speech echoing its themes ⁶³ ⁶⁴. He complained that conservatives have been "*terrified of wielding power*" and argued they need to "*learn to rule*" decisively to crush the left ⁶⁵ ⁶⁶. Notably, Vance **defended a notorious white nationalist** – one convicted of spreading disinformation in 2016 – during this speech ⁶⁷. By endorsing Claremont's vision, which one contributor admitted has an "*authoritarian ring*" (the idea that conservatives must "learn to rule" rather than merely govern), Vance has aligned himself with an openly **illiberal, anti-democratic ideology** ⁶⁸ ⁶⁶.
- **White Nationalist & Extremist Connections:** While Vance does not overtly espouse white supremacist views himself, he has been **linked to white nationalist figures** through his social media activity and rhetoric. An investigation in July 2024 found that Vance follows multiple extreme-right accounts on X (Twitter) that promote white nationalist ideas ⁶⁹ ⁷⁰. For example, he follows the user "**Raw Egg Nationalist**," a prominent figure in an online far-right bodybuilding subculture who has shared Adolf Hitler memes and spread the racist "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory (which claims elites are importing immigrants to replace white Americans) ⁷⁰. Vance also follows "**Bronze Age Pervert**," the pseudonym of a far-right writer whose book *Bronze Age Mindset* is influential among alt-right circles and advocates racist and eugenicist ideas ⁷¹. That account likewise pushes the Great Replacement theory and has praised authoritarian rule by a "military

caste” 72 73 . By engaging with and **legitimizing these voices** (even if indirectly via follows and endorsements), Vance appears to tolerate or even absorb ideas from the white nationalist fringe. In fact, Vance has openly recommended books by figures like Jack Posobiec, a far-right conspiracy theorist known for disinformation campaigns 74 75 .

- **Extremist Rhetoric on Immigration:** Vance’s own statements on immigration have sometimes mirrored xenophobic or racist tropes. A vivid example came in 2024 when Vance **amplified a debunked hoax** claiming Haitian immigrants in Ohio were “abducting and eating” people’s pets. In September 2024, Vance posted on social media that “*people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn’t be in this country*”, referring to Haitian asylum-seekers 76 77 . Local police and officials confirmed **there was no evidence at all** for this outrageous claim and that it was a harmful rumor 78 . The so-called “Springfield pet-eating” story was traced to false social media posts, yet both Vance and Trump seized on it to stoke fear of immigrants 79 80 . Pushing such a narrative – portraying immigrant refugees as literal savages – drew condemnation from civil rights groups. It suggested Vance was willing to **traffic in racist disinformation** to advance an “anti-illegal-immigrant” agenda, a tactic not unlike those used by far-right extremists. (Vance notably did **not apologize** or retract his comments, even after fact-checkers and police debunked the tale 78 80 .)

- **Christian Nationalism and Theocracy:** Vance has also courted the emergent Christian nationalist movement, which many consider anti-democratic because it seeks to erode separation of church and state. In late 2024, as VP nominee, Vance spoke at a rally organized by **Lance Wallnau**, a pastor and leading figure in the fringe New Apostolic Reformation movement. Wallnau is a self-proclaimed prophet who preaches that figures like Vice President Kamala Harris are governed by “occult” spirits and witchcraft 81 82 . He advocates for **biblical rule over America**. Vance’s appearance with Wallnau’s “*Courage Tour*” tent revival was striking – even some Republicans questioned why Vance would share a stage with an openly **anti-LGBTQ+, dominionist preacher** just weeks before the election 83 . During that event, Vance recounted his conversion to Catholicism and lauded America as a place of opportunity (pointing to his own interracial family) 84 . While he moderated his tone that day – avoiding the most virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric in that forum 85 – the very fact he participated lent credibility to Wallnau’s extremist movement. It signaled that Vance is comfortable engaging elements of the far-right religious fringe that seeks to infuse government with fundamentalist Christianity, often at the expense of pluralistic democracy.

In summary, **evidence of anti-democratic or extremist currents** in Vance’s orbit is abundant. He has cast doubt on elections, embraced “rule-or-ruin” governance philosophies, and rubbed shoulders with white nationalists and theocrats. Vance’s trajectory – from a moderate-sounding memoirist to a tribune of the hard right – illustrates the Republican Party’s broader shift. Once critical of Trump’s demagoguery, Vance ultimately *remade himself in Trump’s image*, rallying behind ethno-nationalist themes and authoritarian musings. Whether this evolution represents genuine conviction or political expediency (or both) is debated. What’s clear is that **J.D. Vance followed the money and the base** – and it led him to power as Trump’s ally, bringing along a host of controversies about the company he keeps and the principles he’s willing to abandon.

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