

Taylor Swift and the political needle

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Online Desk: Another day, another Taylor Swift media circus: talk of the pop phenomenon is omnipresent, from her forthcoming concert film to her dating life to her wildly successful global tour. And as the 33-year-old's power grows all-consuming, renewed discussion of her potential political weight has followed. Swift is taking a break from playing sold-out arenas before heading back on the road for the remainder of her Eras Tour, which is poised to become the first tour to make \$1 billion. But she's still gracing stadiums, as she cheers on her rumored beau Travis Kelce, a tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs.

The presence of Swift — who got her start in country before becoming one of pop's most dominant forces — at two of his games saw television ratings spike and sales of the NFL player's jersey soar 400 percent. With hundreds of millions of social media followers and a staunchly loyal fan base, she can move any dial with the tiniest of efforts: late last month, Swift encouraged her fans to register to vote, directing them to the nonpartisan nonprofit Vote.org. The Swifties did not disappoint. That single message posted on National Voter Registration Day saw the institution record more than 35,000 new registrations, 23 percent more than last year and the most since 2020.

Shortly thereafter, California's Democratic governor Gavin Newsom told the entertainment outlet TMZ that Swift was "using her celebrity for good." "What she was able to accomplish in getting young people activated to consider that they have a voice and they should have a voice in the next election, I think it's profoundly powerful."

– Political toe-dips –

Swift's toe-dips into politics have been heavily scrutinized, garnering both criticism and praise; her years-long reticence to voice political opinions received the same treatment. Both the right and the left have long wanted to count her as their own — but she stayed conspicuously quiet for years, including in 2016 when Donald Trump won the presidency. Her silence led many critics to speculate Swift was a closet Republican, until 2018, when she broke both her silence and the internet by endorsing the Democratic opponent of far-right politician Marsha Blackburn in Tennessee. Following her post, even Trump reacted, saying he now liked Swift's music "about 25% less." Blackburn won anyway, but Swift's comments ushered in a new era for the pop star, who began explaining — both in her own Netflix documentary and to the press — that as a young artist catapulted to fame, she struggled to control her own voice.

She said handlers urged her against wading into politics, telling her it could damage her career, particularly in the country music industry, which despite its complexities is often associated with conservatism. Swift said once she was "remorseful" for not backing Hillary Clinton in 2016, and has since delivered full-throated criticisms of Trump. She endorsed Joe Biden in 2020, and has conveyed pro-LGBTQ+ messages through her songs and music videos. And Swift condemned the Supreme Court's reversal last year of the federal right to abortion.

Political scientist David Jackson noted that though Swift took her time before making endorsements, she wasn't the apolitical pop princess many people cast her as, having made clear statements, for example, about the importance of feminism. "Misogyny is ingrained in people from the time they are born," she told the magazine Maxim in 2015, at age 25. "So to me, feminism is probably the most important movement that you could embrace, because it's just basically another word for equality."

– 'Holy grail' –

Swift's rumored romance with Kelce has triggered a wave of right-wing vitriol against her, with conservative pundit Tomi Lahren saying the artist has "lefty, liberal, brain-dead political opinions." Conservatives have similarly attacked Kelce, pointing in particular to his advocacy for Covid-19 vaccines. For Jackson, who has studied the power of celebrity endorsements, such attacks on a figure of Swift's stature is, on its face, "hilarious." "They're picking a fight with someone pretty big," the Bowling Green State University professor told AFP. He said such smear attacks were less about diminishing Swift herself and more about "clout-chasing," or "latching on to her fame trying to get extra views and clicks and links and attention for themselves."

So as the Biden campaign prepares for a likely rematch with Trump, should the president's aides be courting Swift? "Absolutely," said Jackson. "100 percent." Given the tight White House races the United States has seen over the past several cycles, "all factors are significant," he said. "Her celebrity endorsement right now could be considered the holy grail of potential celebrity endorsements."