

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: We just heard the MPR News debate between the two Democrats running for the US Senate to represent the state of Minnesota, US Representative Angie Craig and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan.

We're just about two weeks ahead of the August 11 primary. We want to break down what you just listened to with University of Minnesota political scientist Larry Jacobs, who's been here in the studio listening to the debate along with me. Thank you so much for your time today, Larry.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: So this is the final head-to-head debate for these two candidates ahead of the primary. Let's start with what everyone wants to know. Who had the stronger debate? Was there a clear winner for you?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think each is targeting different segments of the electorate. This is a toss-up election. But there's 16% who are undecided. So each of them came in with a strategy. So who won? Well, it depends which segment of the electorate you're going for.

I heard Angie Craig very deliberately, strategically trying to push the electoral, I can win, she can't, push the fact that she's got a concrete focus on affordability and the vulnerability of Peggy Flanagan on fraud.

Now, that is aimed at moderates. It's aimed at suburban voters. They're very specific sets of voters that's aimed at.

On the other hand, Peggy Flanagan has been doing quite well by targeting the urban core here in Minnesota, Minneapolis and St. Paul and one or two places outside the metro, as well as hammering Angie Craig for, as she put it, lacking the big, bold. She's too complicit with Donald Trump and Republicans.

That is all aimed at mobilizing this very liberal base, trying to charge up that group. If it's a normal primary for midterm election, there's probably an edge here for Angie Craig. So we're seeing Peggy Flanagan trying to just charge up the room and the debate and get people to turn out and vote in numbers that might not be expected.

NINA MOINI: Politics editor Brian Bakst did a great job hitting on a lot of issues. We'll try to pick out some of them. They only had an hour there.

They did talk about foreign policy. They talked about uses of terminology like "genocide" around Gaza. They talked about the Iran war, who's taking AIPAC money, the pro-Israel lobbying group. How much do foreign policy issues resonate with Minnesota voters?

LARRY JACOBS: Traditionally, foreign policy issues don't really register in elections-- the nuances, the complexity, the fact that you have to really dig in to understand what the issues are. But what you heard there were the effort to use these broader themes.

So when Peggy Flanagan responded, it was on this theme about complicity on the part of Angie Craig that she didn't stand up to Donald Trump, that she had signed off on some of his policies or hadn't taken a strong enough stand. Whereas Angie Craig said Peggy Flanagan essentially doesn't really understand these policies. She lacks the understanding of the nuance.

And I think that was an effort to get into this issue about electoral electability and the concrete, tangible nature of the policy. So very different strategies aimed at very different groups of voters.

NINA MOINI: Minnesota obviously became the center of the immigration debate with Operation Metro Surge this year. This has really played a role in this entire race, really, between these two candidates. Did Flanagan and Craig actually really differentiate themselves, though, on anywhere they stand on any policies?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I heard them making very strong arguments to advance their political strategy. Whenever you hear Peggy Flanagan going after the vote by Angie Craig for the Laken Riley--

NINA MOINI: Act.

LARRY JACOBS: --Act in the very beginning of the Donald Trump administration, she uses that to say, look, Angie Craig is complicit with Donald Trump. She's not standing up to him. I would. Now, that is red meat to the very liberal base, particularly in the Twin Cities. And that is deliberate. She wants to charge up that turnout.

On the other hand, Angie Craig said, well, I made a mistake, and I'm willing to acknowledge it, and then afterwards, continually came back to this, I'm holding myself accountable. But Peggy Flanagan won't do it on fraud and other issues. She's more vulnerable come election time.

NINA MOINI: All right. I want to talk about fraud, which has also been an issue that has thrust Minnesota into the national spotlight and a huge talking point for Republicans, as we know. Let's take a listen to an exchange they had here during their debate. We'll start with Peggy Flanagan, and then we'll hear from Angie Craig.

PEGGY FLANAGAN: The governor has taken the lead here. And the administration has been aggressive internally in working to stop fraud, prevent it from happening in the first place. And I think the measures that have been passed through the legislature, in particular, this office, this independent office of Inspector General, I think, is powerful.

Keith Ellison, now the attorney general, has additional resources to be able to go after Medicaid fraud. And Governor Walz has been incredibly aggressive.

NINA MOINI: And here's a response from Craig.

ANGIE CRAIG: The lieutenant governor, even as we sit here today, continues to take absolutely no accountability for any of the fraud issues. And she continues to blame the governor. And I'm going to be honest. It's pissing me off.

I mean, I'm proud to have the endorsement of Gwen Walz this morning. But it pisses me off that you completely put all of the responsibility on the governor of Minnesota when you were the number-two elected leader in Minnesota during that period of time.

And you know what? Republicans, they're going to have a field day with this with you. And it is my responsibility to warn Democratic primary voters that Republicans are dying to run against you because they believe that you have a unique vulnerability on fraud.

NINA MOINI: What was your reflections on that, Larry?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, this is an example about how Angie Craig is running on the electability issue. It is targeted based on polling showing that the more moderate, suburban, college-educated voter who make up a big part of that 16% of "don't knows" or "undecided" that they're really concerned about electability.

Can Peggy Flanagan overcome the fraud issue? She was in the administration. She's trying to say, well, it was the governor's responsibility, and the legislature and the governor have responded. Well, where's the lieutenant governor in all that? And I think that's the territory that Angie Craig went into.

And again, this issue about, "I take accountability. You don't." And it's a way to block the criticism that Angie Craig has gotten on the immigration issue.

NINA MOINI: Well, let's touch on the GOP primary candidates just really quickly. Leaders include former broadcaster Michele Tafoya, Marine veteran Adam Schwarze, and Royce White. Pretty conservative folks, pretty aligned with President Donald Trump.

And you heard Peggy Flanagan come back and say, well, you're going to get it just as bad as me if you're the nominee because you're a Democrat. Does it matter at this point?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think it matters for the voters, I think in terms of the ads that the Republicans are going to run. And it's no doubt the case that there's going to be a ton of money dropped on Minnesota. This race seems to be, now, towards the top of "we can win this" for Republicans.

So the ads, I think, will be quite similar-- attacking on fraud, attacking on too much taxes and spending, and too far left. Maybe they'll even accuse the Democrats in Minnesota of being Communist, which is happening around the country.

But I think it makes a big difference who the Democrat is. Angie Craig is signaling that what she's going to say is that's not my record. I've been a more moderate. I actually have supported border security. I have voted with Republicans on sensible fiscal policy. I am someone who has been very critical of fraud.

And Angie Craig sees the lieutenant governor as someone who is going to be seen by the up-for-grab voters, not the Democrats, not the Republicans already made up their mind, but that up-for-grabs voters, that Peggy Flanagan is going to be seen as culpable.

She was lieutenant governor. And you can just imagine an ad that would have the picture of Tim Walz, the picture of Peggy Flanagan, and they merge, which is, like, a classic attack ad.

NINA MOINI: When you and I talked last week ahead of this debate, you mentioned that Peggy Flanagan came in with an advantage on endorsements, while Angie Craig has a significant fundraising edge. Just before the debate this morning-- and they did talk about this during the debate-- First Lady Gwen Walz endorsed Congresswoman Craig. Governor Walz still hasn't endorsed anybody.

Both Flanagan and Craig were asked if they had asked Governor Walz to endorse them. They said he was staying neutral. They didn't exactly answer. What did you make of that? And Gwen Walz's endorsement-- isn't that kind of the same? I'm assuming they wouldn't endorse a different person?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I'm not going to judge the decision of the governor and Gwen Walz. But yeah, I think it's a powerful statement. If you're looking at those undecided voters, they see Walz, they may not even notice that it's Gwen Walz, not Tim Walz. So I think that registers.

Also in Minnesota, there is a kind of media beat around the governor. So this is going to get a lot of attention, probably get significant news coverage and then on social media. I think that helps. And you heard Peggy Flanagan immediately counter and say, well, look at all the endorsements I've gotten, including the soon-to-step-down US Senator Tina Smith.

So it is going to be a battle. And I think this is a way to signal to those up-to-grab voters, the different parts. If you are very liberal, if you're in the Twin Cities, Peggy Flanagan is saying, I'm true. I'm going to fight for your values. I'm going to push back against Donald Trump.

Angie Craig is saying, look, the people who have been running in competitive elections or governing the state, in the case of Tim Walz, they favor me because they know I can win and that I have experience in the legislature.

NINA MOINI: A lot of voters in Minnesota might already feel like they are familiar with these candidates. I wonder if some of the talk around their personal stories and their backgrounds, struggles they faced, how financial hardship has also been a part of their life, that theme around relatability and who really am I, what type of character do I have as a person-- how do you show that in a debate when you only have limited time? And do you think either candidate did a good job or one did a better job?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, it's interesting. Both of them were ready to lay out that case. And you heard it in their closing statements. Each of them made it very clear that they came from the bottom of the ladder. And they had to crawl-- what it means to be struggling with the crisis on food and housing and other issues.

And so I think that is-- that's a relatability issue. It's also to demonstrate for each of them why they're in this fight. It's authenticity. For Peggy Flanagan, she is fighting for big, bold change. And Angie Craig is saying, look, I want to make sure there are changes. If you're so far to the left that you can't win, then they're not going to be the necessary changes, even if they fall short of the maximalist change.

NINA MOINI: Do you think either of them has an issue in their campaign so far that's particularly recognizable?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think clearly Peggy Flanagan has been able to use the Laken Riley Act vote by Angie Craig to raise some significant questions about Angie Craig compromising, maybe even complicit with Donald Trump early in the administration.

That's a devastating line of attack. And there are going to be a large number of Minnesotans-- that's all they need to hear. You were on that page. I don't care when it was or when you backed out, that is just a single-issue vote.

I think the big issue here, the kind of overriding theme-- you see it all over the country. It's a battle between progressives endorsed by Bernie Sanders and moderates who say, look, I can win in the more moderate kind of competitive districts. And that's what we're seeing in Minnesota.

It's the same script we saw in New York City. The big difference is Minnesota is a lot different from New York City. It's got much larger area, but it's also more rural. The suburban areas are much more moderate.

So we're going to see, the stop of that ideological debate here in Minnesota. There is a ton of national media coverage now.

NINA MOINI: And we know early voting has already begun. There's not a lot of time left. If you were advising each of these campaigns, what would be the message that you would send to them after this debate?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think follow the game plan. I mean, I was looking on social media. And it's very clear where each of them is campaigning. Peggy Flanagan has camped out in the Twin Cities. She's gone to Mankato and a few other places, but most of her time is in the Twin Cities.

Whereas Angie Craig, for a primary election, it's almost like she's running in a general election because she's running statewide. You see ads with her all over the state, including in greater Minnesota and northern Minnesota. And I think that's part of her campaign, that I can turn out. And I am going to turn out suburban voters, exurban voters, rural voters.

For me, each of them, because this is so close, they can't just win in those areas. They have to win by a lot because they're not going to do well in the other person's area of strength.

NINA MOINI: All right, Larry. We always appreciate your expertise. Thank you so much for spending the debate with us.

LARRY JACOBS: Pleasure.

NINA MOINI: That was Larry Jacobs, Director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. You can find more information about the race as well as video of the debate if you missed it between Peggy Flanagan and Angie Craig ahead of the August 11 DFL US Senate primary, online at mprnews.org or on our YouTube channel. And of course, we'll have lots more analysis for you this afternoon, starting at 3:00 on *All Things Considered* with Clay Masters.