

## Volume 34, Issue 2, November 2024

### US politics

# Profile of Kamala Harris

Depending on when you are reading this article, Kamala Harris could still be on the campaign trail or be the defeated presidential candidate, ushering in 4 years of a second Donald Trump term. Alternatively, she could be the president-elect, vanquishing the MAGA movement and potentially some of the far-right forces that it has become associated with.

Yet it is worth pointing out that Harris only became the Democratic candidate for president once President Joe Biden decided to step aside, following a disastrous debate performance against Trump in July 2024. Biden's performance cast further doubt on his age and mental acuity. Harris secured her party's nomination in short order, yet still faced a mountain to climb, with polls showing Trump ahead in the all-important swing states in the midwest. She had lots to do and not much time to do it, including picking a running-mate (she settled on Governor Tim Walz from Minnesota), introducing herself to the American public and providing a more effective counter to Trump than Biden had hitherto managed.

Regardless of the outcome, her short campaign is nonetheless historic, and not just because Harris is the daughter of an Indian-born mother and a Jamaican-born father, a presidential candidate breaking all kinds of firsts and glass ceilings. Just as significantly, the Harris–Trump pairing serves as an inflection point, as America decides between two vastly different candidates with starkly contrasting visions of America's past, present and future.

## Background and formative years

If elected, Harris would become the first female and only the second person of colour to become US president. However, Harris speaks just as much about how she was raised by a single mum as she does about her ethnicity. She also worked a summer at McDonald's while at university. In this sense, Harris's story is similar to many working-class Americans (1 in 8 US citizens are purported to have worked at the fast-food chain).

### How this helps or hinders her in the 2024 election and beyond

Polls show that Harris's elevation to the top of the Democratic Party ticket appeared at first to have re-energised the party base, particularly among African-American citizens who were having doubts about a second Biden term. Harris appears to have 'expanded' the map, bringing into play several states with sizeable minority populations in the south, such as North Carolina and Georgia. Yet the inconvenient truth is that the USA – a country that accepted slavery and then segregation for much of its history – is still deeply divided over the issue of race. On the campaign trail, Trump made a not-so-subtle play to his own core support of white nationalists when he questioned whether Harris was black: 'I didn't know she was black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn black and now she wants to be known as black.' Unfortunately, whether or not Harris wins/won the election, the sight of a second black president in the White House will be unacceptable to a significant chunk of the American population. Trump's former press secretary, Anthony Scaramucci (who has endorsed Harris

this time round), also has concerns that America is not just racist but deeply sexist. Just how far these challenges affect a Harris candidacy – and potential presidency – remains to be seen.

## Early career

Kamala Harris studied law at Howard, a prominent black university, and went on to become district attorney, first for the city of San Francisco and then for the whole of California. This position meant that she was that state's top law enforcer and prosecutor.

### How this helps or hinders her in the 2024 election and beyond

Initially, this career path did not seem to help Harris when she first ran to be the Democratic presidential candidate in 2020. The primary campaign was dominated by Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a racist police officer. While it would seem at first glance that Harris would be the perfect cheerleader for the BLM movement, her background as a prosecutor entailed a close working relationship with law enforcement. This did not chime well with the prevailing mood of the time, especially with progressive Democrats calling to 'defund the police'.

Harris's prosecutorial experience seems to have helped her far more in the 2024 campaign. In Donald Trump, she is taking on a former president who has already been found guilty of 34 counts of falsifying business records and liable for sexual abuse in a separate civil trial, alongside multiple decisions pending in other cases. As a former prosecutor, Harris has been able to state that she 'knows Donald Trump's type'. The law enforcer versus the law breaker makes for a compelling contrast.

## Political career: senator and vice president

Harris became California's junior senator in 2017 and was then asked by Joe Biden to be his running-mate in 2020, propelling her to the vice presidency. With these high-profile positions comes experience, but also a record to be picked apart by her opponents.

### How this helps or hinders her in the 2024 election and beyond

Polls have consistently shown that the cost of living and immigration are top priorities for American voters, and Harris is vulnerable on both issues. Biden has been blamed for high inflation. As his vice president, Harris could easily be tied to an economy that has thus far failed to produce a feel-good factor for the average American, even if the raw economic data looks fairly sound (interest rates have been cut and inflation is much lower than it was). Harris has responded by proposing support for housing costs and matching Trump's plan on ending the tax on tips. Meanwhile, on immigration, Harris has been blamed for the 'crisis at the border' by the Trump team, even if her role in the Biden administration on this issue was rather limited.

On abortion and on women's health more broadly, Harris is on much firmer ground. This subject has climbed the political agenda since the Supreme Court handed down its *Dobbs v Jackson* ruling in 2022, which allowed states to ban abortion. Harris has found talking about these issues – both as vice president and as presidential candidate – far easier than Biden, perhaps owing to his Catholic background. Her campaign was quick in tying Trump to some of the ruling's consequences, including a decision by a court in Alabama to ban IVF treatment. A Harris term in office would almost certainly focus on promoting pro-choice justices and on beefing up federal protections against abortion restrictions imposed by the states.

At the time of writing, Harris is on the final stretch of a remarkable campaign that has never stopped surprising us. Expect plenty of twists and turns during and after the election.

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