

THE NEW STATESMAN

How Kamala Harris became a liability

The vice-president is unpopular with the American public and inside the Democratic Party. Is she a victim of the failures of the Biden administration or responsible for her own misfortune?

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June 8, 2022

Many people had a crush on Kamala Harris at her inauguration as vice-president of the United States in January 2021. There was more excitement about her political rise than there was for the old warhorse Joe Biden. She looked resplendent in purple, the colour of the suffragettes. Defined as ambitious and power-hungry – even by friends of Biden – she had not only made history as the first female vice-president, but also as the first black and south Asian person to be elected to the position. She had fought hard for her place on the podium.

Harris must have hoped then that she had been through the worst. “When we talk about breaking barriers some would suggest that you’re just on this side of the barrier and then you turn out on this side of the barrier. No, it’s *breaking* barriers,” she said during the 2020 election campaign. “When you break things, it hurts. Sometimes you can get cut and it can be painful... but it is so worth it.”

Does anybody doubt the pain and hurt she has experienced since becoming vice-president after her competence and intellect have been endlessly pilloried? After her smile and laugh have been turned into an insult – dubbed the “Kamala cackle” by the right-wing press, as though she were a witch – and her approval rating (roughly 40 per cent) remains stubbornly below that of Biden and Donald Trump?

During the vice-presidential election debate on 7 October 2020, I enjoyed watching her put down the robotic Mike Pence. “Mr Vice-President, I’m speaking,” she said firmly, whenever he tried to talk over her. Yet has Harris ever had anything material to say in the job? She has plenty of defenders, who point to the revolting barrage of sexist and racist abuse she has received, but perilously few supporters. To what extent is she responsible for her own misfortune?

The “Kamala problem” is a fissure running through the Democratic Party. At 79, Biden needs a younger, more exciting heir apparent – that much was already clear when he made Harris his running mate – yet there remains a vacancy. Or worse: the Democrats are stuck with her or the ageing Biden in 2024. And it is not as though the party is bursting with lower-tier candidates who could invigorate the political scene if only Harris were not inconveniently blocking their way.

There is bewilderment among many in the Democratic Party that having been tapped as next-in-line for the presidency, Harris has given every impression of feeling put upon and disrespected. An early point of contention was her dislike of her US *Vogue* magazine cover in January 2021, in which she was photographed wearing Converse trainers. She felt it made her look underpowered. “First world problems,” Biden advisers reportedly sighed.

More recently, the vice-president’s staffers have complained that Harris could be making more exciting political moves were she not stuck at the evenly divided Senate casting tie-breaking votes as vice-president. True, Harris exudes busyness without purpose, though her constitutional role in the Senate is no minor task.

Yet even the greater responsibilities seem to chafe. From the beginning of her term in office, Harris bristled at being given the difficult job by Biden of addressing illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border. She insisted that she would only deal with the “root causes” of the problem. She spent months resisting intense pressure, first from Republicans and then from the media, to visit the border early on in her vice-presidency. When she eventually went to Guatemala in June 2021, her message to migrants was merely a bald: “Do not come.”

“She has done a lot to try to make people forget she was ever involved in the issue,” said David Bier, an associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington DC. “Her strategy has been to distance herself from it rather than to embrace it and come up with a message that would resonate with people. You get the sense that she has given up.”

Last summer in Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, the talk at dinner parties frequented by the political elite was often about how to help Harris out of the mire. Her staff were already leaving at a vertiginous rate. Today, those anxious questions from supporters of how they can help the vice-president have given way to silence and eye-rolls.

“No vice-president since Dan Quayle has made less of an impact in their first year of office than Harris,” said a veteran of Democratic political campaigns. “We are now at the point that you can talk about politics for hours without her name coming up.”

Is it too late to reboot Harris’s profile? In 2008 the *New Yorker* depicted Michelle Obama dressed in camouflage gear and toting a gun in a racist caricature. She went on to become one of the most admired first ladies in US history. Unlike Harris, however, Obama was not perceived as a potential president-in-waiting, a role that has made the vice-president vulnerable.

Harris recently received an unexpected boost in support when on 2 May a leaked Supreme Court document showed a draft opinion that would overturn *Roe vs Wade* – the 1973 case that ruled a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy was protected by the US constitution. Here at last, perhaps, was a battle that could galvanise her vice-presidency. “How dare they tell a woman what she can and cannot do with her own body,” she thundered the following day in a speech at a gala for the feminist group Emily’s List. “How dare they try to stop her from determining her own future? How dare they try to deny women their rights and freedoms?”

By the end of the week, however, Harris had adopted Biden’s more measured line that the end of *Roe vs Wade* posed a threat to broader privacy laws, such as “the right to use contraception

and the right to marry the person you love, including a member of the same sex” – as if the restriction of abortion was not enough of an outrage in itself.

Rachel Bitecofer, a political strategist and polling analyst, blames Democratic consultants for wringing the spontaneity and authenticity out of Harris. “They’re doing to her what they did to Hillary Clinton, which is ‘Don’t say this’, ‘Don’t say that’, ‘Don’t do this’ – and it’s making her afraid to say anything,” Bitecofer said. “When you’re cautious, you’re not personable.”

Trump fanatics no longer care to include Harris in their bonkers conspiracy theories, a sure sign of the vice-president’s diminishing influence. Not that there aren’t racist lines of attack waiting to be used by the right in the event that she runs for president. John Eastman, a constitutional lawyer who was in communication with Trump on the ways to block Biden’s presidential victory certification in January 2021, said in December last year: “Whether Kamala Harris was automatically a citizen at birth because she was born on US soil to parents who were only temporary visitors at the time remains an open issue that the Supreme Court has not resolved.”

In fact, Harris was born in California in 1964 and is therefore a “natural-born citizen” according to the US constitution, whatever the status of her mother and father, who came to the United States (from India and Jamaica, respectively) to pursue doctorates at the University of California, Berkeley.

But we have not heard the last of this new-fangled birtherism.

One of the more persistent political conspiracy theories in 2020 centred on how Harris, with the support of Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, was going to invoke the 25th amendment, declare Biden senile and remove him from the White House at the earliest opportunity. I first heard about this supposed plot before the 2020 election at a gun shop in a hardscrabble town in Pennsylvania. Residents of the town had voted Democrat for generations until Trump came along. The couple behind the till were convinced Harris’s first act as president would be to ban the sale of weapons.

In the run-up to the 2020 election, Harris was regarded as a dangerous threat that needed to be neutralised. In this, the Republicans have thoroughly succeeded. After two horrific mass shootings in May – one targeting black people at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, and the other children at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas – Harris said the solution was clear: more background checks and a ban on assault weapons.

“Enough is enough,” she told residents in Buffalo on 28 May after attending the funeral of the shooting’s oldest victim, 86-year-old Ruth Whitfield. “An assault weapon is a weapon of war, with no place in a civil society.” Yet without a majority in Congress for gun control – which the Democrats do not have – no one believes her words will have much impact.

I returned to the gun store in Pennsylvania in May to find the same couple still obsessing about the “stolen” election, but supremely indifferent about Harris. “As bad as Biden is, Harris is worse,” the woman said. “At least Biden has an excuse. He sounds like he’s on the verge of dementia. What about her ‘word salads’?” This is a familiar Republican jibe drawn from social media videos of Harris’s speeches, which, when maliciously edited, make her sound repetitive and idiotic. Unedited, however, she can still sound as if she is trying very hard to say nothing.

The Biden team bears some of the blame for limiting the vice-president. There is no love lost between Harris and Jill Biden, the other powerful woman in the White House. An early account of the 2020 presidential race by the journalist Edward-Isaac Dovey claimed that during the primary campaign, the first lady swore in response to Harris's criticism of her husband's record on race. That hostility has been underscored by reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns in their new book, *This Will Not Pass*.

"There are millions of people in the United States," Jill Biden reportedly said when Biden's team was considering Harris as vice-president. "Why do we have to choose the one who attacked Joe?"

It is reported in Washington circles that Biden wanted to pick the Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar for his running mate – with Harris primed for the first Supreme Court vacancy. Yet, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 made the appointment of a black vice-presidential candidate a matter of urgency. According to Martin and Burns, Ron Klain, now Biden's chief of staff, picked Harris because she was the only woman of colour who had been sufficiently "vetted".

Harris's election campaign team and vice-presidential office were originally staffed by mostly Biden appointees (allegedly Harris clashed with Karine Jean-Pierre, who last month became the first black White House press secretary). It is reported that across the White House as many as 21 black employees have either left or are expected to leave in the coming weeks, including some frustrated at their lack of support and opportunities for promotion under Biden.

Biden himself – with an eye to running again in 2024 – has had a vested interest in sidelining his vice-president. Symone Sanders, Harris's former chief spokesperson, who quit the vice-president's office in December 2021 to join MSNBC, told a *New York Times* podcast: "The reality is that the president has said he intends to run for re-election." She added that if he wanted to stand again, "he should".

Biden needs no encouragement. What began as a wish to run for a second term has hardened into the conviction that only he is capable of defeating Trump (still the most likely Republican candidate) in 2024. But if Biden were not to run, Sanders observed: "I find it very hard to believe that he is not going to endorse his vice-president, the first black woman to have that role."

Sanders sounded distinctly cool about the prospect of a Harris presidency, but she was right that her former boss would expect to have Biden's loyalty. Whether Harris would receive his endorsement as his successor is moot. There is a chance Biden could opt to play the "elder statesman" and refrain from making a choice.

More likely, Harris is here to stay as vice-president. There is no chance that Biden would be able to replace Harris with another running mate in 2024 without her agreement. The public insult to such a historic vice-president would be too grave. And even if a dynamic new presidential contender were to emerge – a somewhat fanciful prospect – it would be difficult to sweep Harris aside.

There is no sign of diminishing ambition on her part. Quite the contrary. Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, a former Californian entertainment lawyer, is an active member of her team (eliciting

quite a few raised eyebrows at the number of press releases the “Office of the Second Gentleman” churns out). He was recently at a “fireside conversation” for lawyers in New Hampshire, an early primary state. Coincidence? It is hard to say at this stage.

For all her public struggles, polling among black voters suggests Harris would be hard to beat, particularly given the importance of South Carolina in the Democratic primary calendar. According to a *Politico*/Morning Consult poll in December 2021, if Biden didn’t run 52 per cent of black voters would support Harris in a 2024 primary.

In April, a survey by Republican pollsters, Echelon Insights, put Harris’s support among black voters at 53 per cent. It was this vital electorate that propelled Biden to the presidential nomination in 2020.

Cornell Belcher, the author of *A Black Man in the House*, told *Politico* that even Barack Obama did not poll this well with black voters during his battle with Hillary Clinton for the 2008 presidential nomination. “It is clear that the work she’s been doing is beginning to give her credibility and likeability with African-American voters in a way that no one else in the field has right now.”

Despite this, however, a number of rivals are rumoured to be considering running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2024, such as Eric Adams, the mayor of New York City, who has been whispered to be the “anti-woke” candidate (though critics claim that he will need to get the city’s spiralling crime rates under control first to stand a chance).

Progressives would like the popular New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or the liberal Californian congressman Ro Khanna to run for president – and even Bernie Sanders thinks he still has a chance. On 16 April, in a list of the top ten Democratic presidential candidates for 2024, the *Washington Post* provocatively ranked Pete Buttigieg, who is serving as secretary of state for transport, second behind Biden but ahead of third-placed Harris. This ranking will have stung the vice-president, given Buttigieg’s low ratings among black voters (3 per cent in the *Politico*/Morning Consult poll).

Other potential nominees include Cory Booker, the senator for New Jersey, and Klobuchar (both of whom have run for president before) and Gavin Newsom, the slick, wealthy governor of California.

There is surprisingly little fondness for Harris in her home state of California. She gained a reputation for flip-flopping over the death penalty as a prosecutor turned politician in San Francisco, and was criticised during her campaign for the 2020 presidency for lacking a distinctive political philosophy. One reason she left the race early, in December 2019, is that she was heading for an embarrassing defeat by Bernie Sanders in California on Super Tuesday.

Previously, Harris has been accused of managing a deeply dysfunctional vice-presidential office. Relations with her own staff were memorably described last year as a “shit show”, and they have not greatly improved since. In the past three months, her chief of staff, deputy chief of staff and national security adviser have all announced their departures.

Some regard the criticism aimed at Harris as just another example of sexism. “Do you think all men are good bosses? We never hear anything about them,” said Bitecofer. “The treatment of Harris as aloof reinforces Republican narratives,” she added. Harris, however, has not been able to reverse this perception.

Symone Sanders recently answered diplomatically when asked about the internal strains within the vice-president’s team. She said: “[Harris] is a boss that asks people to bring their best to work every day.” Perhaps the most effective way to assess Harris is to pose the same question. Is she bringing her best to work every day? If so, the prospects look poor for the Democratic Party post-Biden.

The late Republican senator John McCain once said that one of the main duties of the vice-president was to enquire daily as to the health of the president. Most Democrats are fervently hoping that a more popular successor to Joe Biden – one capable of taking on Trump in 2024 – will emerge. This may be wishful thinking. The Kamala problem is here to stay.