

## One heartbeat away from the presidency: Kamala Harris vs JD Vance

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### Theme

The vice-presidential candidates (Harris and Vance) in 2024 will be subject to significant scrutiny this electoral cycle.

### Summary

The [vice-presidential candidates](#) in 2024 will receive significant scrutiny because the winner will likely be the nominee for the Democratic or Republican Party in 2028. The selection of a vice-presidential running mate typically says much about what the presidential candidate thinks is needed to win the election. President Biden chose Kamala Harris in 2020 to expand Kamala Harris and JD Vance his appeal to women and minority voters and to mitigate concerns about his advanced age. By contrast, former [President Trump's](#) recent selection of JD Vance indicates he wants to double down on Trumpism and is not interested in broadening the tent to win the [election](#).

### Analysis

#### 1. Introduction

President Biden campaigned in 2020 as a bridge candidate, which left many voters to believe that he would step aside in 2024 so that Harris would run as president. Many Democratic voters were surprised in April 2023 when he announced he would run for re-election. His poor performance during the June 27 presidential debate, in front of 50 million viewers, has triggered intense private and increasingly public discussions within the Democratic Party about whether Biden should continue at the head of the ticket. As a result, the attention has increasingly focused on Vice President Harris, who is viewed as the only Democratic candidate who could quickly integrate into the existing campaign structure, win the party's nomination, secure the support of donors and beat Trump. Thus far, though, Biden has shown no public signs of backing down.

On 15 July former President Donald J. Trump announced he had selected JD Vance, a 39-year-old Republican Senator representing Ohio and former critic, as his running mate. A few hours later, delegates at the Republican National Convention overwhelmingly endorsed his nomination. If elected, he would be one of the youngest Vice Presidents in US history and the youngest in recent history.

Vice President Harris phoned Vance to congratulate him on his nomination and to express her hope that he would agree to a debate. Although both sides have yet to agree on a date or a network to host it, the candidates are expected to debate at least once before the November election.

The vice-presidential candidates will receive significantly more scrutiny in this election for several reasons. First, if Biden were to step aside, Harris would immediately be the leading candidate to replace him on the ticket. Secondly, the two presidential candidates –Biden and Trump– are 81 and 77, respectively, the oldest major party candidates in US history. If elected, it is plausible they might not be able to finish their four-year term. Third, the individual who serves as vice president from 2025 to 2028 will be heavily favoured to lead the Democratic or Republican Party for the 2028 elections, as both vice presidential candidates are young (Harris turns 60 in October), and the Constitution bars presidents from serving a third term. Lastly, the attempted assassination of Trump on 13 July reminded voters that vice presidents are just one heartbeat away from the presidency.

## 2. Bios

Harris was born in California to immigrant parents from India and Jamaica. She attended Howard University and the University of California's Hastings College of Law. She has had a long career in law and politics. Harris served as District Attorney of San Francisco, Attorney General of California and as a Senator representing California. Before becoming the Vice President, she focused on criminal justice reform, climate change, access to healthcare and civil rights.

Harris is seen as a trailblazer for women of colour in US politics. Although she unsuccessfully ran for president in 2020 and quit the race in December 2019, she became the first female, the first Black and the first South-Asian Vice President in 2021. Harris is known for her progressive views on social issues, criminal justice reform and healthcare.

Vance was born into a working-class family in Ohio. He attended Ohio State University and Yale Law School. Vance joined the US Marine Corps after the 11 September 2001 attacks and served in Iraq. He authored a best-selling book that explored the socioeconomic problems confronting his hometown, the cycle of poverty that had entrapped people living in Appalachia and the Democratic Party's inability to connect with voters from these communities. It gained fame because it offered insights into Trump's appeal during the 2016 election to white, working-class voters living in parts of the US where manufacturing job losses and the opioid crisis had driven individuals and families into poverty, abuse and addiction.

After publishing the memoir, Vance then worked in venture capital in California before returning to Ohio to launch a non-profit organisation that sought to develop opioid addiction treatment.

As a senator, he became one of the Senate's most outspoken supporters of Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. He focused on the economic revitalisation of part of the US that had suffered from economic decline, reducing government regulations and addressing the opioid crisis. Vance has conservative views and emphasises traditional values, limited government and economic policies that support free markets. He is viewed as a spokesperson for the white working-class

community, particularly in Appalachia, and has used his personal story to highlight issues faced by this demographic.

### 3. Policy positions on key campaign issues

#### 3.1. Abortion policy

The Biden-Harris campaign is making abortion policy one of its prominent themes in 2024. It believes it may help motivate voters who are concerned about the 2022 Supreme Court ruling that eliminated the constitutional right to abortion. Harris has often been deployed to deliver this message and has said that 'everything is at stake' for reproductive rights in the November election.

By comparison, Vance opposes abortion rights, even in the case of incest or rape, but believes there should be exceptions if the life of the mother is at risk. He applauded the June 2022 US Supreme Court decision. He does not support a national ban and instead believes the states should decide the policy.

#### 3.2. Immigration

Biden tapped Harris in 2021 to lead the US government's efforts to address the root causes of migration in Central America and has travelled to the region to advance the US government's efforts to increase public and private sector investments. She has also been an outspoken supporter of immigration reform legislation, including efforts to legalise undocumented immigrants.

Vance opposes 'every attempt to grant amnesty' to undocumented immigrants and argues that undocumented immigrants are a source of cheap labour that undercuts wages for US-born workers. He supports the continued construction of the border wall along the US-Mexico border and ran a campaign ad in 2022 that said, 'Joe Biden's open border is killing Ohioans'. He prefers a merit-based immigration system to determine who is eligible for US visas.

#### 3.3. Trade

In the Biden-Harris Administration, the US has pursued a multilateral approach to address trade issues, particularly with China. It has maintained the tariffs on Chinese imports that former President Trump implemented. It has sought to deny Beijing access to sensitive US technologies and recently announced tariffs on imports of products in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries and critical minerals to ensure US national security, combat climate change and reduce inequality.

Like Trump, Vance has [called](#) for 'broad-based tariffs, especially on goods coming in from China'. He believes Chinese imports pose an unfair threat to US jobs, industry and commerce, and that implementing this policy would result in 'making more stuff in America, in Pennsylvania, in Ohio, and in Michigan'.

### 3.4. Ukraine

Harris [declared](#) in February 2023, 'The United States will continue to support Ukraine, and we will do so as long as it takes'. According to an [analysis](#) by the Council on Foreign Relations, the US Congress has passed five bills that appropriate a combined US\$175 billion to support Ukraine since February 2022. In addition, Biden and Ukrainian President Zelensky signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement in June to strengthen Ukraine's ability to defend itself and deter aggression in the future.

Vance has been one of the most outspoken critics of US support for Ukraine during its war with Russia. Once elected to Congress, he led the failed efforts in 2023 and 2024 to block the Administration's US\$60 billion military aid package for Ukraine. In an [interview](#) in February 2024 he questioned the current US efforts to support Ukraine. 'How long is this expected to go on? How much is it expected to cost? And importantly, how are we actually supposed to produce the weapons necessary to support the Ukrainians?' Two months later, in an [opinion essay](#), he said he was 'opposed to virtually any proposal for the United States to continue funding this war'.

## 4. Strengths

Biden selected Kamala Harris as his running mate at the 2020 Democratic National Convention in August 2020. He chose her because she 'was a fearless fighter for the little guy and one of the country's finest public servants'.

When she took office in January 2021, Harris became the first woman, the first black and the first South-Asian Vice President in US history. Although she has already served a term, her background brings historical significance to the ticket and helps to appeal to and energise a broad coalition of voters.

During the 2020 and 2024 campaigns, Republicans and some Democrats have questioned Biden's age, vigour and mental acuity. In response, Biden in 2020 spoke of himself as a transitional figure and did not commit to seeking a second term in 2024. He then selected Harris as his running mate, bringing more youth to the ticket, as she was 55 when she was nominated. In 2024 Biden has struggled to set aside these concerns, but with Harris on the ticket, voters know a younger leader could carry the torch if Biden could not continue.

Harris has significant experience in public service and politics. She has served as California's Attorney General, a US Senator, and now as Vice President. She also ran a presidential campaign in 2020 and is running for Vice President again in 2024.

She has progressive credentials but a pragmatic approach, which aligns with Biden's goal of a unified and collaborative government. Her progressive stance on healthcare, criminal justice reform and climate change resonates with voters, particularly younger voters and activists. During her time in the Senate, she also demonstrated that she would work across the aisle.

She is also an effective public communicator and debater. In the Senate she was viewed as a good questioner of witnesses during Judiciary Committee hearings. In the 2020

campaign she had a viral moment when she pressed then-candidate Biden on busing policies, and polls showed that she won the debate against former Vice President Pence.

She and President Biden have good chemistry and a balanced ticket. They worked together in the Senate and have served together for almost four years. They represent a united front and a good match. Her prosecutorial skills and assertive debating style complement Biden's more empathetic and conciliatory approach.

Leading up to the Republican National Convention, Trump was considering three vice-presidential candidates: Doug Burgum, a Republican governor from North Dakota; Marco Rubio, a Republican Senator from Florida; and Vance.

When Trump announced his decision on social media, he said Vance 'will be strongly focused on the people he fought so brilliantly for, the American Workers and Farmers in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota, and far beyond'. Several of these states are expected to play a critical role in determining the outcome of the November election.

Vance's background and best-selling memoir resonate with working-class voters, particularly in the Rust Belt. Moreover, his story of overcoming adversity aligns well with Trump's appeal to blue-collar voters in crucial swing states.

Trump and Vance also share a populist ideology. Vance's populist views and criticism of the elites echo Trump's political rhetoric. Both emphasise economic nationalism, scepticism of globalisation, and prioritising US workers.

Vance is a strong communicator and frequently appears in the media. The success of his book made him a national figure, which has helped him generate media coverage and draw attention. In addition, he is articulate and capable of repackaging Trump's message and providing a more coherent policy argument to different audiences, particularly Trump's base and undecided voters.

Trump and Vance also share similar policy views. Both are strong on combating illegal immigration. Vance has conservative social issues, such as family values, religious freedom and opposition to progressive social policies. Moreover, Vance's focus on revitalising the US heartland and addressing the opioid crisis is consistent with Trump's economic agenda and efforts to tackle critical issues impacting small-town America.

Vance is a vocal supporter of Trump and a fighter. He was the first member of Congress to attend his criminal trial in New York to support Trump. And he was among the first politicians to speak out on 13 July after Trump survived the attack. He alleged that Biden's 'rhetoric led directly to President Trump's attempted assassination'.

He is considered a fresh face in politics with outsider appeal and veteran status. He has been in politics for just two years, making it easier to position himself as an outsider to the political establishment, just like Trump. His four years of military service also help him appeal to veterans and patriotic voters, who represent part of Trump's base.

At 39 years old in 2024, Vance could also help bridge the generation gap, help Trump increase his vote share of younger voters and mitigate concerns about Trump's advanced age (he is currently 78).

## 5. Weaknesses

After four years as Vice President and running two national campaigns –one in 2020 and one in 2024– Harris is well-known to voters.

Republicans have already signalled they plan to attack her as being ineffective at stemming irregular migration to the US. During the Republican National Convention, speaker after speaker referred to her as the 'border czar'. Although that line of attack misconstrues her actual role of leading US government efforts to address the root causes of migration in Central America, it is clear that President Trump and Republicans will seek to blame Harris for the record levels of immigrants seeking irregular entry into the US.

This line of coordinated attack allows Republicans to rail against immigration and lay the foundation for future attacks, regardless of whether Harris remains the Vice Presidential candidate or ends up leading the Democratic ticket.

While she is well-liked within Democratic circles, particularly women and Black voters, she is not without detractors.

As a high-profile figure, Harris is polarising, with strong detractors. Her prosecutorial background and some of her policy positions have been points of division. During the 2020 campaign some Democrats did not think she was progressive enough. For example, her record as California's Attorney General came under focus, particularly her 'tough-on-crime' policies. Critics argued that some of her policies disproportionately affected minority communities.

As vice president, she struggled early on in the Administration. Biden handed her difficult issues, and she found it challenging to carve out a distinct lane for herself. This began to change after the June 2022 Supreme Court decision that eliminated the right to abortion. She emerged as the Administration's lead on reproductive rights and has been active in meeting with advocates and encouraging citizens to vote for ballot measures that enshrine abortion rights at the state level.

Despite Vance's many strengths, he also has some notable weaknesses. The first and most obvious is his 180-degree reversal on Trump. Vance was critical of Trump before and after Trump's victory in 2016. He called Trump 'America's Hitler', 'a moral disaster' and an 'idiot'. However, as he prepared to run for US Senate in 2022, he pivoted and began backing Trump and his policies, eventually earning Trump's backing during the primaries.

Vance's outspoken views and strong opinions can also be polarising. He also does not appear willing to help Trump moderate his views or expand his base; in fact, he may be further to the right on certain issues. His rhetoric on topics like abortion, immigration and

the 6 January 2021 insurrection may alienate independent or moderate voters. These positions will likely lead to many attacks by Democrats in the coming months, particularly on abortion. In 2021 he said he did not support abortion, even in cases of rape or incest; however, in 2022 he expressed support for a measure that would ban the procedures after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

He is also new to politics and government, so he lacks the detailed policy expertise and legislative experience that comes with years of public service. He is among the least experienced vice-presidential candidates on a major party ticket in recent history.

Vance does not add any gender or ethnic diversity to the ticket. He also represents Ohio, which has recently turned solidly red, meaning that he will unlikely be needed to deliver Ohio for the ticket. Vance is a relatively inexperienced campaigner and debater on the national level. He and his background have yet to be seriously tested.

Lastly, he is considered very ambitious, which could be a problem for Trump, who always wants to be in the spotlight. If Trump perceives Vance as getting too much attention or not being deferential enough, it could become a point of friction.

## Conclusions

In the past, presidents selected vice-presidential candidates based on the need to promote unity with a political party, capture a crucial swing state, mitigate a perceived weakness or help an outsider president navigate Washington.

In 2020 President Biden chose Harris as his running mate to enhance the ticket's appeal across various demographics, energise the Democratic base (which was not particularly enthralled with voting for Biden) and mitigate concerns about his advanced age. If Biden wins in November and completes his second four-year term, Harris will be heavily favoured to carry the torch and lead the Democratic Party ticket in 2028.

By contrast, Trump selected JD Vance to leverage the latter's appeal to white, working-class voters –a voting bloc Trump was already expected to win–, to help him win battleground states. In doing so, Trump is not seeking to build out the tent of the Republican Party; instead, he is doubling down on Trumpism.

Trump cannot run for president again in 2028, so his choice of a 39-year-old running mate who shares his nationalist, populist and 'America First' agenda is telling. If Trump and Vance win in November, Vance will immediately be considered a leading candidate for the party's 2028 presidential nomination and ensure that the MAGA movement and Trump's legacy lives on.