
The new Democratic presidential ticket: what's changed and what remains the same

Eric Sigmon | Independent consultant

Theme

While Vice-president Kamala Harris's truncated presidential campaign relies heavily upon President Biden's policy framework, she has strategically altered the communication of these political and policy objectives to energise the Democratic base, address the campaign's weaknesses and win over critical voter demographics.

Summary

The emergence of [Vice-president Kamala Harris](#) as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee has sparked a new wave of enthusiasm for the Democratic ticket in the November elections. Harris has opted to campaign as a change candidate while serving as Vice-president. She draws significantly from [Biden's policy framework](#), though she has strategically adjusted the political and policy messages to energise the Democratic base, address the campaign's weaknesses and win over critical voter demographics.

Analysis

1. Introduction

President Joe Biden's decision to abandon his presidential candidacy and endorse Vice-president Kamala Harris to become the Democratic Party's nominee upended the 2024 presidential campaign. According to [national polling averages](#) compiled by *The New York Times*, when Biden dropped out on 21 July, he trailed former President Donald J. Trump by three points. As of 8 September, this national average shows Harris with a two-point advantage, a five-point swing in less than two months.

Biden's action thrust Harris into a scenario with few successful precedents. Only one sitting vice-president running for higher office in the modern era has won the presidency. Two vice-presidents failed in their campaigns: Richard Nixon in 1960 and Al Gore in 2000. George H.W. Bush won the presidency in 1988, but he rode the coattails of President Ronald Reagan, who had an [approval rating above 50%](#) leading up to the November election. Bush also had many months to prepare for his campaign.

Biden's move also put Harris in the awkward position of running for president to replace an unpopular president while still serving as his vice-president. She needs to forge her own political identity by showing voters she is the candidate of change and there is daylight between her and her boss. However, she cannot disavow his Administration's actions because Biden is still revered in Democratic circles, and such a dramatic pivot would not appear credible to voters.

Launching a campaign four months before election day is challenging, but it thus far seems to be working in part because Harris is a 59-year-old daughter of Indian and Jamaican parents who replaced an 81-year-old white man on the Democratic ticket and is running against a 78-year-old white man who served as president from 2017 to 2021 on the Republican ticket.

Since launching her campaign, she has taken credit for some of Biden's more noteworthy accomplishments while portraying herself as a change candidate promising a 'new way forward'. To the surprise of many, Harris quickly energised disaffected Democratic voters and united the party behind her campaign.

Leading up to the 19-22 August Democratic National Convention, Harris sustained over four weeks of positive media coverage. The convention, which provided Harris with a highly organised national forum to define herself and her policy positions, further sustained her momentum.

What is clear from the convention, including the public events leading up to it, is that the Harris campaign is relying heavily on the Biden campaign's policy framework while adjusting its message and emphasis to create and sustain momentum and address the campaign's shortcomings to win over critical voter demographics. She has chosen to elaborate on some topics, while making only general statements about other issues, leaving it up to voters to decide what that means. It could mean that she would deprioritise these issues if elected, or it could mean that she prefers to avoid speaking in depth about these topics for fear of hurting her chances with crucial voter blocs.

This analysis evaluates the transition from the Biden campaign to the Harris campaign: what has changed, and what remains the same?

2. What has changed?

2.1. *Messaging*

Biden and his campaign repeatedly described Trump as an existential threat and a dictator-in-waiting. His campaign was solemn and serious. This frame made sense in 2020 but proved less effective in 2024. By contrast, Harris has appeared joyful on the campaign trail, leading some to call her a 'happy warrior'. She and her campaign prefer to ridicule Trump, calling him 'weird' in an attempt to belittle him.

Harris regularly discusses the future on the campaign trail. She has embraced the line, 'We're not going back'. In her first national ad after the convention, she said, 'Instead of being focused on the politics of the past, we need to be thinking about the future'. She is seeking to break from the politics of the past. This message is primarily directed at Trump but also implicitly critiques Biden, who has been in national politics since 1972.

She also frequently talks about freedom. Harris discusses freedom from poverty, freedom from gun violence, freedom to have a legal abortion, and freedom to breathe clean air and drink clean water. Speakers at the Democratic convention used the word 'freedom' 227 times, compared with 67 times by Republicans at their convention in July. She even made Beyoncé's song 'Freedom' her campaign theme song. Biden focused

on freedom during his 2024 State of the Union speech and campaign, but his message failed to resonate with voters.

2.2. Policy issues

Harris has thus far been generally reluctant to detail her policy platform. She has provided some specifics, but these have primarily been on issues where Democrats have an advantage, such as abortion, or on ones where she needs to reduce or eliminate Trump's advantage, such as reducing prices or controlling immigration.

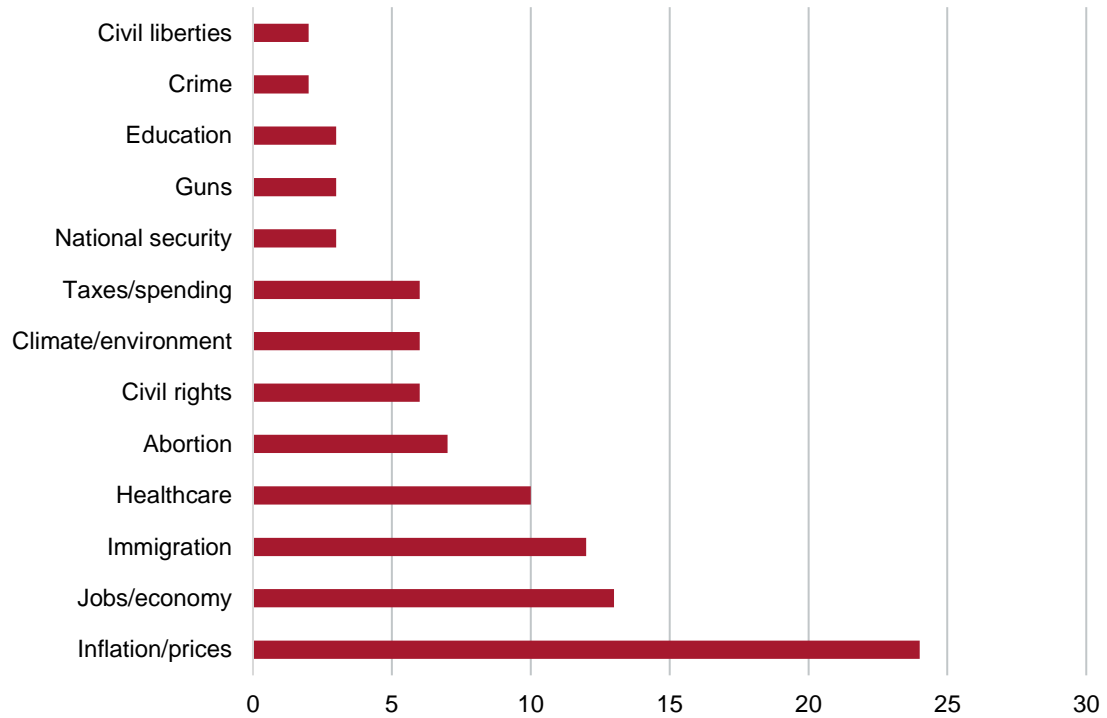
This approach of vague policy details allows voters to believe what they want about her priorities, enabling Harris to cast an appeal as broad as possible to win over undecided or disaffected voters. It also allows her to avoid intra-party conflicts and negative news coverage for as long as possible.

Inflation and prices are the most important issues for voters in the 2024 election, according to a The Economist/YouGov poll conducted on 11-13 August. Although recent national polls show Harris building a slight lead over Trump since she entered the race, a 23-25 August Reuters/Ipsos poll found that despite narrowing Trump's lead on the economy by 11 points since late July, she still trails him by 3 points (43% to 40%) on this issue.

Biden regularly argued that the economic situation was better than voters perceived. However, he struggled to demonstrate he understood voters' concerns about rising costs. Harris, on the other hand, relies on many of Biden's policy prescriptions but empathises with voters' frustrations and emphasises populist policies that address concerns from the middle class about rising costs. She is promoting 'an opportunity economy where everyone has a chance to compete and a chance to succeed'. She has also committed to going further than Biden in helping to combat high grocery store prices by pursuing a federal ban on price gouging for food to address voters' concerns about rising costs. She also supports raising taxes on the wealthy but believes his proposed capital gains tax of 39.6% is too high. She has proposed a tax of 28% instead. To assist homebuyers, she has proposed a US\$25,000 tax credit for first-time homebuyers and the construction of 3 million houses in four years. She also would like to revive and expand the child tax credit to help families with the rising costs of having a family.

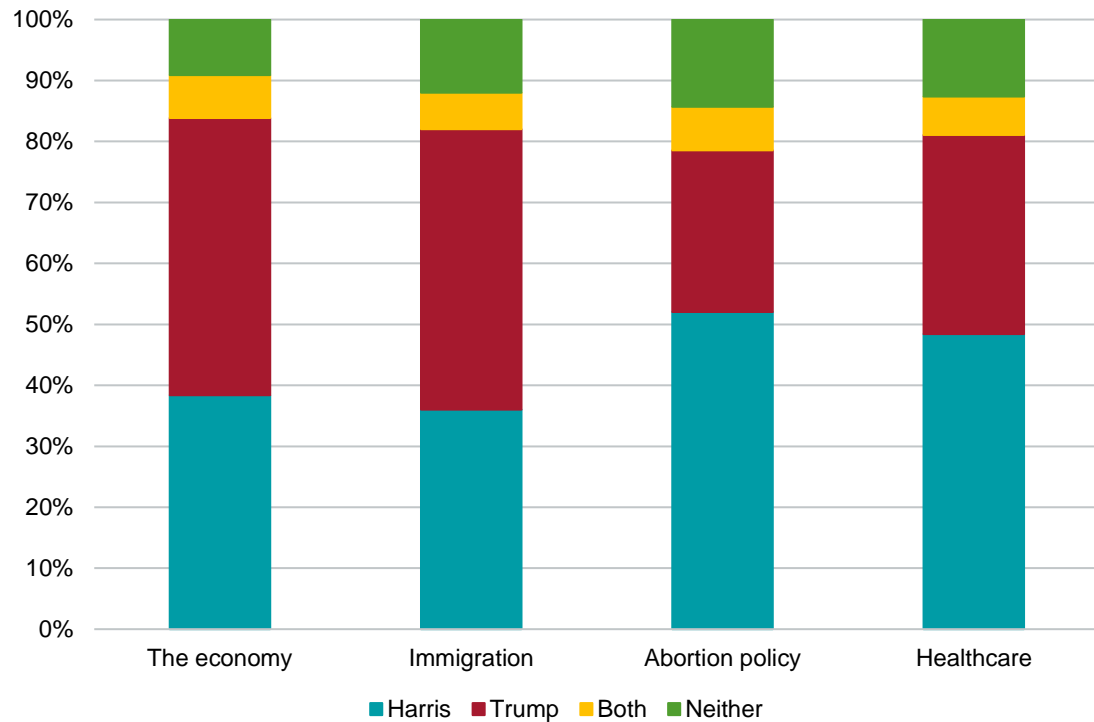
In a significant ad buy after the convention, she has unveiled four new ads to undercut Trump's advantage on this issue. In one ad, she says, 'I will fight to give money back to working- and middle-class America'. The ads promote her middle-class background, underscore that she understands Americans' concerns, describe her plan to lower inflation, and paint Trump as an ally of large corporations and billionaires.

Figure 1. The most important issues for voters



Source: the author, the Elcano Royal Institute and The Economist/YouGov poll.

Figure 2. Trust in handling US public policy issues



Source: the author, the Elcano Royal Institute and AP-NORC poll.

As a lifelong Roman Catholic, Biden was uncomfortable and ineffective in discussing reproductive rights and abortion. This was evident when he fumbled his opportunity to press his party's advantage with voters on this issue during the 27 June debate with Trump. A 20-24 June Associated Press/NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found that seven in 10 Americans believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Harris emerged as the Biden Administration's most effective messenger on abortion after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, reversing a legal decision that provided a national right to abortion. In March of this year she became the highest-ranking US official to visit an abortion clinic when she toured a centre in Minnesota. Since being a presidential candidate in 2024, Harris has promised to 'restore reproductive freedom' and push for a federal law to restore the right to abortion and pre-empt attempts by conservative US state legislatures to ban the practice. She has said at campaign rallies, 'When Congress passes a law to restore reproductive freedoms, as president of the United States, I will sign it into law'.

In his August 2020 acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Biden called climate change an 'existential threat'. He said, 'It's not only a crisis, it's an enormous opportunity. An opportunity for America to lead the world in clean energy and create millions of new good-paying jobs'. Since taking office, Biden has made climate and so-called 'green jobs' an Administration priority. Harris briefly mentioned climate change during her acceptance speech. Although Harris's approach contrasts with Biden's emphasis on the issue, it is not likely to mean that she would de-emphasise it if elected. She has a long history of supporting climate issues, so it is more likely a strategic choice to broaden her appeal, distance herself from past liberal positions and help her win critical battleground states like Pennsylvania.

Harris has also created some separation with Biden on the Israel-Hamas war, the only significant issue that divides the Democratic Party. Biden has been steadfast in his support for Israel throughout the war, though he has at times been critical of the country's conduct. Harris has also been supportive of Israel, but she has been more sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians. After meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Washington in July, she told reporters, 'Israel has a right to defend itself, and how it does so matters'. She was deeply troubled by the 'images of dead children and desperate, hungry people fleeing for safety'. She added that she 'will not be silent' or 'become numb to the suffering'. During her acceptance speech at the convention, she said, 'I will always stand up for Israel's right to defend itself'. She added that her goal was to ensure that 'Israel is secure, the hostages are released, the suffering in Gaza ends, and the Palestinian people realise their right to dignity, security, freedom, and self-determination'. This statement probably does not go far enough to appease some of the undecided voters pushing for the US government to implement an embargo on arms to Israel, but it signals she would likely be a stronger advocate for Palestinians than Biden or Trump.

US-China competition has been a critical foreign policy topic for the Biden Administration regarding national security, trade, technology, competition and human rights. China also featured prominently in the Biden Administration's National Security Strategy issued in October 2022. However, since becoming a presidential candidate, Harris has said very

little about China, even though Trump has controversially proposed implementing a tariff of 60% or higher on Chinese imports. During her acceptance speech, she said she would ensure that 'America –not China– wins the competition for the 21st century'. She did not provide any additional details.

The Biden Administration had previously said it would issue a decision by the end of August on whether to increase tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, semiconductors, solar cells and lithium-ion batteries. Many are arguing to increase the tariffs, but some industries and some members of Congress have expressed concerns about increased costs. The Administration announced on 30 August that it would delay the determination until the end of November. This decision ensures it would not impact the presidential election. Had the Administration moved forward as initially planned in August, it would have been the first significant China and trade policy decision since Harris became the Democratic Party's nominee and could have put her in a difficult position to defend it.

3. What has remained the same

3.1. *Limited, controlled appearances*

Since the start of her 2024 presidential campaign, her team has limited her public appearances to ones where she can deliver scripted speeches to audiences. She has excelled in these settings, drawing huge crowds and keeping to her prepared remarks. She has not yet participated in a press conference or granted an interview as a presidential candidate, much to the chagrin of journalists, Trump and the Republican Party. Biden's team also sought to limit his public appearances and media interviews. He hosted the fewest press conferences since President Ronald Reagan. However, after his disastrous 27 June debate performance against Trump, Biden scrambled to increase his public engagements to address voter concerns.

3.2. *Light on policy details*

Harris has provided some details on her policy positions on the campaign trail and during her acceptance speech, but they are scant compared to prior campaigns. This is unsurprising for a presidential campaign that just began in late July, but voters should probably not expect a significant increase in the campaign's final months. In recent years, campaigns have put out less information than in the past, reasoning that the more information is published, the more fodder the other party has to use to attack them.

The case of US Senator Elizabeth Warren's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2020 underscores this point. Warren was widely recognised for having numerous detailed policy papers, but she gained little traction in the Democratic field and bowed out of the race in March 2020.

Congressional Democrats have also cautioned that she does not need to provide more policy specifics. Michigan Representative Dan Kildee told the press, 'I actually think the way the American people think about this choice is less about the minutiae of policy and more about the direction of the country, number one, and secondly, about the person'.

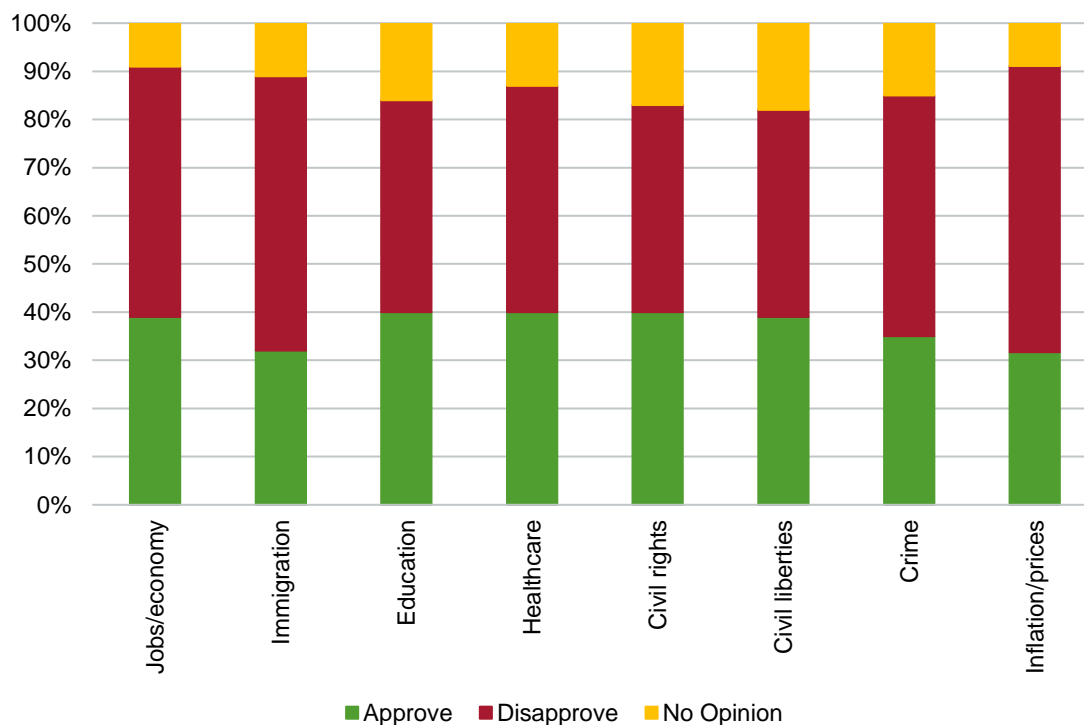
President Biden's campaign website had information on six issues, such as 'Growing the Middle Class' and 'Protecting and Strengthening our Democracy'. The sections were light on policy details; instead, they made general statements about the issues and outlined the risks of a Trump presidency. Harris has taken this approach one step further. Her current campaign website contains no information on her public policy positions. It includes information on donating and getting involved and lists lengthy bios for Harris and Walz.

3.3. Policy issues

Harris's policy framework relies significantly on the Biden Administration's accomplishments and campaign. For example, she said during her acceptance speech that she would 'pass a middle-class tax cut that would benefit more than 100 million Americans'. A campaign official confirmed to the press that she would continue to support Biden's commitment not to raise taxes on Americans earning less than US\$400,000 annually.

Harris has leaned into the issue of immigration, as did President Biden, in an attempt to address one of her campaign's vulnerabilities. In a The Economist/YouGov poll conducted on 11-13 August, 87% of respondents said immigration was an important issue. It also showed that 57% of respondents disapproved of Biden's handling of the issue. She describes herself as a 'border-state prosecutor' who prosecuted gangs and cartels and committed to hiring thousands more border patrol officers. She has also criticised Trump for torpedoing a bipartisan immigration bill that would have strengthened US border security and asylum laws. In her acceptance speech, she promised to 'bring back the bipartisan border security bill that he [Trump] killed. And I will sign it into law'. Although the bill is considered quite conservative and would upset many in the Democratic base, both Biden and Harris recognise that they need to show voters that they are advancing solutions to improve border security. They also seek to draw a contrast with Trump, who urged Republican members of Congress to reject the bill in early 2024 to deny the Biden Administration a victory in an election year.

Figure 3. Biden's approval rating on specific issues



Source: the author, the Elcano Royal Institute and The Economist/YouGov poll.

She addressed several important components of Biden's foreign policy during her acceptance speech. She promised to 'strengthen –not abdicate– our global leadership'. She also reminded voters that she met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky five days before Russia invaded Ukraine to 'warn him about Russia's plans to invade' and 'helped mobilise a global response' to the war. Lastly, she called for peace in the Middle East and emphasised the importance of standing up to 'tyrants' such as Russian President Vladimir Putin. Although she did not delve into significant detail on these issues, this was unsurprising given how most acceptance speeches focus on US domestic policy. Moreover, most voters understand where she likely stands on these issues.

Conclusions

After Biden stepped down and endorsed Harris, she has enjoyed six weeks of positive media coverage as a presidential candidate. She unified the party, energised the base, raised record sums of money, selected a running mate with broad appeal and delivered a strong acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention.

Now comes the hard part: answering questions in unscripted settings like interviews with journalists, debates and candidate forums. In these situations, she will be forced to respond to questions about her past policy positions, defend or distance herself from the Biden Administration's policies, and discuss in more detail how she would govern as president.

She must figure out how to promote her new political identity while taking credit for the Biden Administration's successful policies. She will also need to distance herself from the Administration's failures without appearing to disavow them completely.

She must be prepared for questions about her past as well. Her lengthy career in public service, dating back to 1990, leaves a long trail of information from which the media and Trump will draw to press her to answer uncomfortable questions.

During her nearly eight years in Washington, she often appeared more comfortable asking difficult questions than answering them. As a US senator, her popularity grew as she grilled Trump Administration nominees or officials in congressional hearings. However, as a vice-president she had a mixed record of success in one-on-one interviews, though she improved over time.

Harris sat for her first media interview as a presidential candidate on 29 August. While she did not deliver an impressive performance, she also did not produce mistakes that would likely hurt her campaign. She defended the Administration's record on a wide range of topics while repeating throughout the interview that America was ready to 'turn the page' and eager for 'a new way forward'.

Her performance in these upcoming unscripted settings and ability to promote herself as a change candidate –despite being the sitting vice-president and backing Biden's policies– will be critical to sustaining her campaign's momentum and determining whether she wins the 5 November election.