



Promise, risks in turning to Kamala Harris

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PERSPECTIVE

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Vice President Kamala Harris swiftly established herself as the Democratic front-runner to take on Donald J. Trump within hours of President Biden's exit on Sunday, fundamentally rewiring the presidential contest at warp speed.

Now, the race has been transformed into an abbreviated 106-day sprint that more closely resembles the snap elections of Europe

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US Vice President and potential 2024 Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris takes the stage as she attends the 30th annual Essence Festival in New Orleans, Louisiana, on July 6, 2024.
● EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN/REUTERS



In a sprint of a race, Ms. Harris is poised to attack Donald Trump on his felonies and, in a 2024 twist, his age, but Republicans will be galvanized to fight her, too.

She inverts age argument

During the Republican primaries, Nikki Haley had warned everyone who would listen that the first party to swap out its octogenarian candidate — Mr. Trump will turn 80 while in office if elected to a second term — would win. She was making the argument for herself but the logic applies to Ms. Harris, too.

Unlike the 81-year-old Mr. Biden, Ms. Harris, 59, is not old — and just that fact neutralizes what has been one of the most potent Trump lines of attack. Within minutes of Mr. Biden's quitting, Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans were questioning Mr. Trump's capacity to govern into his 80s, a daring attempt to reframe an age debate that has been so damaging to Democrats.

"She can make the issue of age and fitness a liability for Trump," Erin Wilson, Ms. Harris's deputy chief of staff, said on a call on Sunday with the group Win With Black Women. Polls have consistently shown

that voters have not been overly concerned with the 78-year-old Mr. Trump's age, but simply taking the issue off the table may be enough of a victory for Democrats. They were facing the stiff headwinds of three-quarters of Americans thinking Mr. Biden was too old — a view shared widely even before his doddering debate. Ms. Harris is also expected to give Democrats a far more vigorous campaigner. Her day job is not nearly as demanding as Mr. Biden's, and she can barnstorm the country at a pace far faster than Mr. Trump has undertaken.

She's a former prosecutor; Trump's a convicted felon

Ms. Harris has often been at her best politically when she has taken on the role of prosecutor-in-chief, whether on the debate stage when she first bore into Mr. Biden in June 2019 over busing or as a senator on the Judiciary Committee where her intensive cross-examinations

went viral. When she ran for president, among her tag lines — and her struggling campaign cycled through a few catchphrases — was that she was best positioned to "prosecute the case" against Mr. Trump.

Now, she will have the chance to do so in the same year in which an actual prosecutor in New York scored 34 felony convictions against Mr. Trump, and he still faces more than one future criminal trial.

People who have worked with Ms. Harris believe that framework could allow her to play to some of her strengths — and expose some of Mr. Trump's weaknesses. Polls have shown a noteworthy share of voters think Mr. Trump has committed crimes yet are still planning to vote for him.

Harris will be tagged California liberal

If Mr. Biden was widely seen as too elderly to lead, he had other advantages built up over 50 years in the public spotlight. Namely, he has long been

viewed as a more moderate Democrat who pushed back against the more extreme elements of his party. It helped him appeal to the political middle.

"Do I look like a radical socialist with a soft spot for rioters?" he fumed at one point in the 2020 race. His image was such that at times Republicans opted to attack him by suggesting he was being directed by other forces. Ms. Harris does not have that advantage.

Instead, Ms. Harris got her start in politics as the district attorney of one of the nation's most famously liberal cities, San Francisco, before winning statewide in one of the nation's most famously liberal states, California. (Mr. Trump, notably, was among her donors then.)

And while Ms. Harris did not carve out a reputation in California as an outspoken progressive — her tagline as D.A. was about being "smart on crime" — when she ran for president in 2020, she regularly staked out positions to Mr. Biden's left, including embracing a "Medicare for all" system that he had avoided.

As Mr. Biden's partner for the last three-and-a-half years, Ms. Harris faces the added burden of supporting the agenda of a president who has become deeply unpopular.

The Trump team has already signaled they plan to attack her on immigration in particular. The question is whether Ms. Harris can successfully find a way to campaign on some of the Biden-Harris administration's most popular accomplishments without the current unpopularity of the man who previously led the ticket.

She gives Democrats much-needed jolt of momentum

Mr. Trump and his advisers were not looking to shake up a race he was winning by almost

every metric. As Republicans gathered last week in Milwaukee, they were downright jubilant about the direction of 2024, seeing Mr. Trump as almost a candidate of destiny days after he had survived an assassination attempt.

Now, his team must shift to run a very different race against a very different candidate. Ms. Harris has the ability to potentially energize the Democratic base — especially some of the core constituencies who had felt alienated — in ways Mr. Biden no longer seemed capable of. The president had struggled, relative to his 2020 performance, among Black voters and younger voters in particular; constituencies that Ms. Harris's historic potential candidacy would seem poised to improve upon.

In an early sign of the Democratic appetite for a change, donors contributed more than \$60 million online on Sunday — the third biggest day in the history of ActBlue.

It was also notable that Mr. Trump cast doubt on a future debate with Ms. Harris after he had so eagerly sought to share a stage with Mr. Biden, suggesting a venue change from ABC to Fox News.

Her gender could galvanize Democrats, also Republicans

In the 2020 primary, Democratic voters wrestled for months with the question of who would be the strongest candidate against Mr. Trump. They wondered, often aloud, about the idea of nominating a woman.

Mr. Trump, after all, had just defied expectations and defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016. The party ultimately selected an older white man in Mr. Biden.

For much of the Trump presidency and beyond, Democrats have benefited from a gender



Former US president Donald Trump (C) stands on stage for a podium check at the Republican National Convention at the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on July 17, 2024.
● BILL CLARK/CQ ROLL CALL