

Kamala Harris needs to knock Trump in her DNC speech

But she shouldn't pop joy balloon

By Chris Smith
Reporter

OPINION

Kamala Harris's first few weeks as the Democrats' 2024 godsend have been fun, but the drumbeat to get serious is growing louder. The New York Times: "Trump's tax plan could add trillions to the national debt. Harris's is a mystery." The New Yorker: "Harris's campaign Web site, meanwhile, does not even have a policy section, or an articulation of beliefs." The Washington Post: "If she hopes to prevail, Ms. Harris needs to present her ideas."

Well, as luck would have it, there's a perfect opportunity just around the corner to satisfy those demands for specifics at an event in which Harris will have the stage to herself and tens of millions of people will be listening to her every word. She is, of course, the star and the closing speaker of the Democratic National Convention and can use the spotlight to explain all the policy details she'd pursue if she were elected president of the United States...

Nah. She is unlikely to use the podium in Chicago to roll out proposals for changes to marginal tax rates or suggestions for how to end the carnage in Gaza. She will want to come across as serious, but she doesn't want to puncture the joy balloon that has been energizing Democratic crowds and lifting her up in the polls.



The illustration shows the US Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris along with snippets of her younger years. **ELEANOR SHAKESPEARE/POLITICO**

Harris's main goals next Thursday night will be to introduce herself to that large cross-section of Americans who are not obsessive politicians but are just starting to pay attention to the race for the White House, and to sell herself to anyone unsure of her ability to lead the country. She will cite facts and examples from her record in public office to illustrate accomplishments. But Harris will probably lean most heavily on broad themes and visions while trying to forge a personal connection with voters by talking about her own compelling rise from humble roots: the child who grew up in a working-class Berkeley neighborhood as the daughter of Indian and Jamaican immigrants to become California state attorney general, US senator, and vice president. "Telling her story as part of the larger American story and as an example of what is possible in this country is going to be inspiring," says Jon Favreau, the former top speechwriter for Barack Obama who went on to cofound Crooked Media and cohost Pod Save America. "It's also going to help inoculate her from the darker charges by Trump and

JD Vance that she is other, that she is not like us." Retailing her biography for political purposes has not always come easily to Harris. "Men have no problem talking about how great they are," says Ashley Etienne, who was a senior aide to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and to Vice President Harris. "Women want to talk about you. She had to get comfortable talking about herself. It's very different than Barack Obama. I mean, he ran a whole tour talking about himself for two years before he ran for president." An Obama speechwriting alumnus, Adam Frankel, is leading the drafting of Harris's convention speech as the Democratic nominee for president. Frankel had already been crafting a convention speech for Harris as the vice-presidential nominee. "He's very good at uplift," says Favreau, who hired Frankel to work for Obama's 2008 campaign. "He was close for a long time with Ted Sorensen, so Adam has a lot of JFK, RFK kind of style." Another Obama veteran, Megan Rooney, who had been on President Joe Biden's White House team, was recently hired as the Harris campaign's director

of speech writing. "Megan is, I think, the best in the business at bringing somebody's humanity through in a speech," says Dan Schwerin, who was director of speechwriting for Hillary Clinton's 2016 run, with Rooney as his deputy. "And having written for Hillary and for Michelle Obama, she knows as much as anyone about how to write for a strong woman leader." One tricky choice for Harris will be how much to go after the eminently mockable Donald Trump. Most attacks on the Republican nominee will likely come from the convention's opening acts, including vice-presidential nominee Tim Walz, creator of the Democrats' "big weirdo" strategy. Yet, Harris can't entirely skip drawing a sharp contrast. "You don't ever want to look like you're afraid of taking on your opponent," says Cody Keenan, Obama's director of speech writing from 2013 to 2017. "And with somebody like Trump, who is abnormal, basically an overgrown bully, taking him on directly is the most important thing you can do." Another challenge is covering a lot of ground without putting everyone to



US President Joe Biden (R) and Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris hold a joint event in Maryland on August 15, 2024. This was the president's first joint speaking event with Harris since he dropped out of the presidential race. **GETTY IMAGES**

sleep. It's no accident that the most memorable Democratic convention speeches tend to be delivered by someone other than the presidential candidate. Ted Kennedy's "The Dream Shall Never Die" in 1980, Mario Cuomo's "A Tale of Two Cities" in 1984, Jim Hightower's "Born on Third Base" in 1988, and Obama's career-making 2004 stem-winder were all part of the undercard because the lesser figures can stick to a narrower narrative. Harris doesn't write out her own first draft or outlines for speeches, Etienne says, but instead prefers to brainstorm with her writers and aides and then edit and revise what her staff puts on the page. The basic framework, which Harris has been workshoping in her speeches at enormous rallies around the country, is already fairly clear: a choice between a prosecutor and a felon, between going backward and going forward, between retribution and hope. "I was dreading having to

write a speech or read anyone's drafts trying to advocate for Joe Biden," a top Democratic speechwriter says. "This will be a lot more fun." Which doesn't mean the end result will be lightweight. Schwerin says Harris will probably lead with her values and use policy as proof points. "So, for example, I am virtually certain that she will talk about signing a law to bring back Roe v. Wade as the law of the land," he says. "That's policy. But you don't need to add 10 footnotes." Harris always emphasizes that her speeches need to provide context and foundation, Etienne says. Her speech can't just be about Trump. "She's going to wrap it in a bow, asking this question about who we are as a nation and who we want to be." The messy details, about exactly how Harris proposes to take us there, may need to wait until at least September's debate.

The article first appeared on VanityFair.



People listen to Congresswoman Dina Titus deliver an opening speech at a Kamala Harris rally at Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, on August 10, 2024. **ALEXIS JAZZ/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**