Opinion
NCR Voices
U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is pictured in a June 3, 2021, photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Eve

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is pictured in a June 3, 2021, photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 24, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On Monday, we started looking at how the presidential contest has changed in the past week. Today, we'll look more deeply into what the changes portend for the Democrats.

Recent polling shows that Vice President Kamala Harris fared worse than President Joe Biden among white, non-college voters. The Democrats have been losing these voters by large margins for years, and the difference between how Biden and Harris would fare against former president Donald Trump is small, according to a recent poll taken before Biden dropped out: Biden loses white, non-college voters to Trump by 36 points and Harris loses by 38 points. Two points may not sound like much but Biden won two of the three Great Lakes' states that former president Donald Trump had won in 2016 by less than two points.

So, the first thing that has changed with Biden out of the race is the map. Harris will work to strengthen her numbers among white, non-college voters, who are critical to winning those three Great Lakes' states — Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — that Biden flipped. But I would look to her to put Arizona, Georgia, Nevada and North Carolina in her win column in part because demographic changes in those states yield a younger and less white electorate.

This has implications for the world of labor politics too. The United Auto Workers union is still critical to winning Michigan, but in the new landscape it is Unite Here, which represents hotel and restaurant workers, that grows in importance. No Democrat can win Nevada unless the culinary workers' union, a part of Unite Here, is enthusiastic and organized. Unite Here also was key to winning Senate seats in Arizona and Georgia in 2020 and in Nevada and Pennsylvania in 2022. They know how to organize and win those swing states.

It is difficult to know how the politics of race and gender will enter into the race. Barack Obama won the presidency twice, but in 2008 and 2012, the politics of race were different from what they are today. One Republican member of Congress has already called Harris a "DEI vice president," the implication being she was chosen primarily because she is a Black woman not because of her many competencies.

Advertisement

Of course, growing up in Connecticut, I remember the Democrats' ticket for statewide races was always balanced. That meant, at the time, that if the gubernatorial nominee was Italian, the lieutenant governor nominee had to be Irish. Calculating with an eye to diversity has been a feature of American politics for a long, long time.

Still, as Robert Kuttner pointed out at The New Republic, Harris needs to navigate the issue of race carefully. "To the extent that DEI fatigue afflicts more than far-right voters, it's up to Harris to prove that she is not an identity candidate but a powerful nominee in her own right," Kuttner argued. Her debate prep team needs to have her prepared for this line of attack, and she needs to not be defensive. If Trump calls her a DEI candidate, she could do worse than to reply, "Tell that to the felons I prosecuted and put in jail. I know you are awaiting sentencing, Mr. Trump, so you might soon have the opportunity to ask them."

Misogyny is also difficult to gauge this year. It is remarkable that America has not elected a woman president so we don't have much to go on. It is hard to analogize to Hillary Rodham Clinton's bid for the White House in 2016: Clinton had been one of the most polarizing politicians in the country for more than 20 years by the time she ran.

Harris has been leading the charge for the Biden-Harris ticket on the issue of abortion, which made sense. But, now, when she is at the top of the ticket, the campaign needs to expand her range and recognize that abortion was never going to carry the ticket across the finish line. In Wisconsin, in 2022, Mandela Barnes hoped it would win him a Senate seat, and it didn't. Brandon Presley hoped the issue would carry him into the governor's mansion in Mississippi, and it didn't. As I have argued before, abortion rights always win in a referendum on the issue, but it doesn't always confer victory on a pro-choice candidate.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Dr. Sarah Traxler look on as U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris speaks as she visits an abortion clinic in Minneapolis March 14, 2024. It was the first time a president or vice president visited an abortion clinic. (OSV

News/Reuters/Nicole Neri)

More importantly, in crafting a new narrative for the campaign, Harris knows that the GOP will be portraying her as the left's culture warrior-in-chief. For example, she is from San Francisco. She lists pronouns on her Twitter profile. There will be plenty of special interests hoping to use her candidacy as a vehicle for their cause. In conversations with political operatives over recent weeks, their principal concern about a Harris candidacy has been the fear that she might not recognize the degree to which things that seem normal in elite, Democratic Party circles strike most Americans as strange or worse. What works with the base might prove disastrous with the undecided voters Harris needs to win.

Championing the culture wars from the left is counterproductive when running against a divisive figure like Trump. If she were to employ one of the clunky phrases created by leftist, academic orthodoxy, like "persons capable of pregnancy" or "settler colonialism," she will lose and lose big. It is vital that her inner campaign circle include someone with an ear for avoiding those lines which would turn up in a Bill Maher opening monologue. Sadly, campaign consultants and political activists often fail to realize how ridiculous they sound to average Americans.

Part of the problem with culture war politics is that it elevates marginal issues to a central place. If Harris is not talking about the economy in the next four months, she is talking about the wrong thing. The last four years have been rough, and the economy has been uneven. She needs to acknowledge the unfinished quality of the work so far and forcefully articulate a populist economic vision that, rightly, paints corporate power, not powerless migrants, as the problem.

How she talks about the economy matters too. The one quality that she has but hasn't always evidenced as effectively as Biden is empathy. People need to know that she cares about them and their lives. Defending the administration's policies in a way that pretends they were completely successful will only translate as indifference to the struggles many Americans make at the end of the month to pay the bills. No contrast with Trump is more important to swing voters than the fact that Trump doesn't give a hoot about average Americans. Harris needs to show she does. Again and again.

Harris' relative youth will speak for itself. There is now only one candidate over 75 in the race.

The biggest worry Democrats have about Harris is that she will not prove to be a gifted campaigner. They remember that when she ran for the presidency four years ago, she dropped out before a single vote was cast. What lessons she has learned in the past four years will quickly become evident.

What is clear is that the entire race has been upended by Biden's decision to drop out. So much remains to be seen. In the next few days — not weeks but days — Harris must introduce herself to the American people. The GOP will be trying to do the same thing, albeit with different points of emphasis! If Harris can keep her focus on the center, and avoid being dragged into culture war fights, she might well become the nation's first female president.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.