

Kamala is going nowhere

The US Vice President will stick fast to her boss.

By **J Vivian Cooke**



Vice President Kamala Harris is the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party for the 2024 Presidential Election. At 7/4 her odds are lower even than Joe Biden's which are 9/4. Even though 14 former vice presidents went on to become President, Harris's path to her party's nomination, still less the White House, is far from certain. Her chances will depend on the dynamic she establishes with her boss.

As Senator, President Biden delighted in forging friendships in the clubbable atmosphere of the US's highest legislative chamber. However, he never had an opportunity to work with Harris, having departed from the Senate before Harris was first elected to it in 2016.

The Biden/Harris partnership got off to a rocky start in the 2019 Democratic primary debates where Harris established herself as Biden's leading challenger by repeatedly questioning his record, and commitment, to opposing racism. Her assertion during the first that "Vice President Biden, I do not believe you are a racist" was followed up in the 31 July debate by the lethally pointed: "...the vice president has still failed to acknowledge that it was wrong to take the position (in opposing federally mandated school busing to desegregate public schools) that he took at that time".

Offering her the Vice Presidency shortly afterwar probably shows that Biden has forgiven her but has he forgotten. Even if their closeness has been exaggerated, the lack of familiarity and similarly racially-charged televised clashes during the 2016 primary campaign did not prevent Biden from developing an effective working relationship with President Obama, even if, somewhat miserably, Biden only visited the White House residence once when the Obamas were in residence.

Harris has helped to bridge any gaps by appointing to her team former senior Biden advisors such as Ashley Etinne (Director of Communications); Herbie Ziskend (Deputy

Director of Communications); Symone Sanders (Press Secretary); and Vincent Evans (Director of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs).

The Vice Presidency is always defined by the role each incumbent is able to carve out. In describing his duties as Vice President to Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller lamented: "I go to funerals; I go to earthquakes". At the opposite extreme is the prime ministerial role delegated to Dick Cheney by President George W Bush. Having hankered for the top job for so long, Biden is unlikely to cede swathes of executive authority to his Vice-President so Harris would be well advised to follow Al Gore's example of concentrating on a single distinctive policy area - the environment in Gore's case). JFK famously did not rate his Vice President, Lyndon Johnson.

As yet the Harris Vice Presidency looks disjointed and she has yet to make a recognisable impact. Former colleagues in the Senate from both parties (Lindsey Graham (R) and Bob Casey(D)) struggle to identify her role in the Biden administration. The Whitehouse Press Secretary, Jan Psaki, acknowledged that Harris is not the consigliere to Biden that he was to Obama, describing how they typically work as: "more of a discussion with others who are leading and running point on these issues". It doesn't sound great.

In Washington, political power is measured by how much face-time you have with the President. Like her predecessors, Harris maintains a ceremonial office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and a working office in the West Wing. It remains to be seen if Harris will be a ceremonial or working Vice President.

But she can already claim to have been instrumental in tying down Biden's biggest success in her first one hundred days. On 5 February, and again, on 4 March, the Vice President was called upon to exercise the power of one of her only two constitutionally defined roles by casting a tie-breaking vote as President



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of the United States Senate to pass the American Rescue Plan Act. With the Senate evenly balanced, at least until the mid-terms in 2022, Harris's tie-breaking vote in the Senate makes her indispensable in implementing the now-fraught President's legislative agenda.

That role will elevate her standing as Vice President, but it will also bind her inextricably to Biden's record as President. Ideologically, this will be a comfortable position for her to be in: both she and the President occupy a place on the American political spectrum just far left enough to be acceptable to committed Democrats, but not so far left as to frighten off independent voters.

As the recognised standard bearer of the Democratic Party's "electable" moderates, she will be opposed by her party's progressive wing represented by Sanders, Warren, and AOC. Elizabeth Warren's representation of Harris's record as a Californian prosecutor effectively brought her surge in the opinion polls to an abrupt stop in 2019; and, already, as Vice President, she has drawn pre-emptive fire from Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, for telling Guatemalan refugees not to come to the US during her first foreign trip.

Harris's future is welded to the success or failure of the Biden Presidency, as she always knew it would be. She will be going nowhere. **L**