

# **Unburdened by What Has Been: The Case for Kamala**

We have one goal: defeat Trump. Like it or not, we have one realistic path: Kamala.

July 3, 2024

## **Summary**

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  - Be prepared to align with political and financial support.
  - Debate over—and ultimately organize around—a new running mate.

## **Why This Memo?**

***We are currently losing. We need to do something different to win.***

This memo is written with the premise that the number one most important priority above all others is defeating Donald Trump. There is nothing—*nothing*—more important. And we need to be very real that we are currently losing.

The debate was President Biden's chance to disrupt the narrative that he's too old and reset the terms of the race. This failed miserably. It validated years of rightwing attacks on Biden and

made clear he is incapable of prosecuting the case. His debate performance, the campaign's defensive response, and the total lack of plan to reassure his base and the voters about his capability should shake everyone's confidence that he can win this election. Failure will have devastating results for our democracy.

We now have three possible options: President Biden can take the necessary steps to demonstrate that he's up to the job, he can step aside for another candidate, or Trump will win.

***The popular discourse is not a realistic reflection of our options.***

The discourse about potential alternate candidates in the event Biden steps down is increasingly detached from reality. Donors, pundits, and Democratic elites are freely slinging around wild ideas about dream tickets. This chaos is used as a shield by "stay the course" advocates who frame the choice as Biden or chaos. The swirl over different possible candidates is obscuring the fact that there is a single, clear path forward.

***There's one path out of this mess, and it's Kamala.***

Kamala Harris has the strongest claim to democratic legitimacy. She is the only candidate who can take the reins right now, instead of in late August with less than three months left to go. She has significant and widely underplayed electoral advantages. She can win.

To be clear: this isn't an argument about deservedness, or about why you personally should love Kamala. This is about strategy and winning in the face of unimaginable electoral stakes. The anti-Trump coalition cannot afford to discount the strengths of the nominated Democratic running mate and current vice president. She's not the best option - she's the only realistic option to win.

This document outlines why.

**Who is This For and Where Did it Come From?**

This memo is intended for Democratic party stakeholders - activists, donors, electeds, commentators, etc - who are concerned about our current trajectory but unclear about what should happen or what to do. Ultimately only Joe Biden has the power to drop out and to choose to head off chaos by anointing Harris, but he listens to people, and they listen to people, and you might know those people. If so, and if you find this convincing, you should make this case.

The authors of this memo are senior operatives within Democratic political institutions that will not be taking a position regarding this crisis. We have no professional or personal ties to Harris. We simply want to defeat Trump. We are writing this in our personal capacities because we believe that we need to cut through the chaos, identify which options are realistic and which are fantasies, and advocate for the only real path forward. The stakes are too high to do anything else.

## **If Biden Steps Back, Kamala is the Only Realistic Option**

If President Biden drops out, the choice is clear for Democrats. We can unite behind his elected successor immediately, or we can invite an extended period of chaos and an open battle for the top-of-the-ticket.

### ***Kamala is the only candidate with any claim to democratic legitimacy.***

It's worth stating the obvious: Kamala Harris is the only potential successor who has been nominated and won as part of a national ticket. As Vice President she has spent the last four years one heartbeat from the Oval Office. Voters reaffirmed their support for Joe Biden in the 2024 primary knowing that Harris would be his successor in the event that he is unable to complete his duties. And while polls obviously have significant limitations given the name recognition disparities, she currently wins any poll of alternate Democratic candidates by a wide margin.

In an alternate timeline where Biden declined to run for reelection, an open primary would be welcome and appropriate. That is not the world we live in. Democratic voters in every state have already cast their primary ballots, and they voted for Joe Biden with the full knowledge that Kamala Harris is his running mate. Democratic voters who pulled the lever for Biden in the primary did not scrutinize the politics, identities, or affiliations of their Biden delegates, and they have in no meaningful way consented to delegates making a different choice. At this point in the nomination process, Kamala would be the closest thing we have to a democratic selection were President Biden to withdraw. A move to entrust that nomination not to those voters, but to convention delegates, would be enormously high-risk.

### ***The non-Harris path: an extended period of chaos and bad headlines culminating in an untested, undemocratically selected candidate.***

A brokered convention leading to the ideal "strongest" candidate is a popular fantasy right now. It's crucial that all party stakeholders are clear-eyed about how disastrous this scenario would be.

Remember the context: Kamala is the democratically elected Vice President (in addition to being the first Black woman VP). She has served as a loyal governing partner, with zero hint of scandal or misbehavior. In a head-to-head matchup with Donald Trump, she polls comparably with every other candidate being contemplated. You do not have to love Harris to recognize that there is simply no viable public justification for casting her aside.

Choosing anyone other than the VP delays the selection of our nominee by two months, throws our campaign infrastructure into disarray, and ensures that media attention remains heavily focused on Democratic bickering over the divisions within our coalition instead of Donald Trump and his MAGA agenda. We would then head into a high-stakes, high-uncertainty convention, at which point we would skip over our democratically elected first Black woman VP for a (likely) white candidate who has no comparable national profile, no claim to democratic legitimacy, and has never been tested on the national stage. This candidate would then have less than three

months to heal the party's rifts, somehow mend ties with Black voters, and stand up a full national campaign to beat Trump.

Well-meaning brokered convention supporters focus their argument on the strengths of other candidates, but they need to contend with the harsh reality of what would be necessary to win the nomination. This is a recipe for disaster.

## **If Kamala is Our Nominee, She Can Win**

### ***Kamala's deficits are real but addressable.***

Let's not kid ourselves—the Vice President has real political weaknesses. Her [approval rating is underwater](#), and has been since 2021. She's been closely associated with some of the biggest political headaches of the administration, namely immigration. She's had her fair share of gaffes. And after years of a relatively low public profile, [voters don't see her as a strong leader for the country](#). These are vulnerabilities that should not be taken lightly, but they also present clear opportunities for growth with the electorate.

It's not unusual for Vice Presidents to be perceived as lacking in leadership - in fact, it's almost inherent to the job, which requires operating in a subordinate role and taking care not to diverge from the administration line. Running as a Presidential candidate will allow Harris to present herself in a more commanding light. She'll be a prosecutor going up against a convicted felon; a woman fighting against the man who ended Roe v. Wade. The headlines write themselves. Picking high-profile, strategic fights with the Trump campaign will both help define Trump and help define Harris as a leader and fighter.

### ***Kamala's strengths are real and can grow.***

An extensive [Morning Consult-Politico poll](#) on the vice president from June reflects a number of advantages she would have over Trump in a head-to-head match up based on his greatest vulnerabilities:

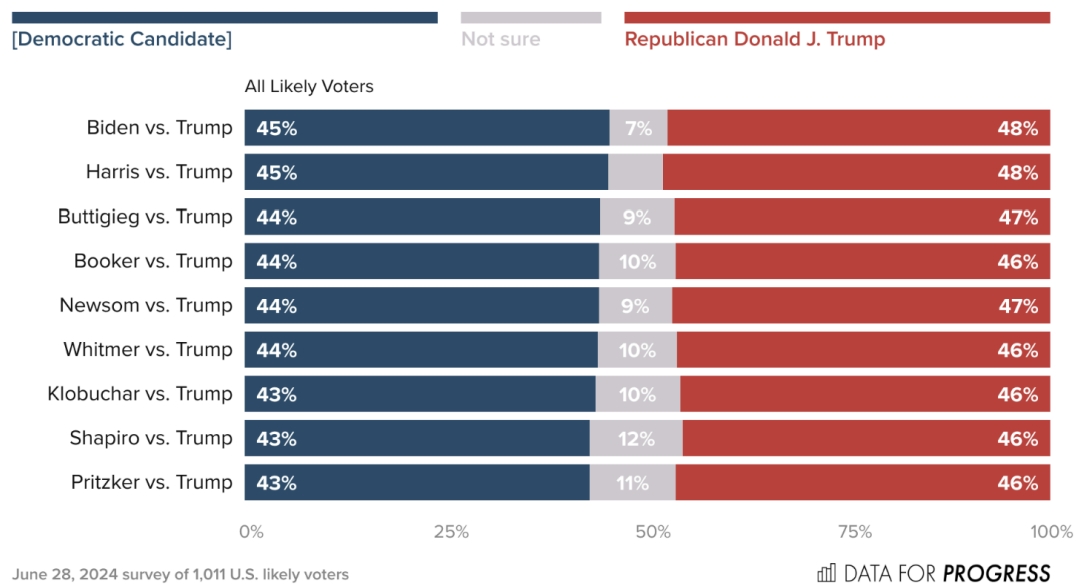
- A majority of voters see Kamala as mentally fit, level-headed, and prepared (a stark contrast to Trump and even President Biden)
- A majority of voters trust Kamala on jobs, abortion, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights
- She performs well among Black voters and exceeds Biden's favorability among both Latino voters (a shift from 2020)

The swirl over Kamala's approval ratings has largely ignored the fact that public opinion is already moving towards Harris over Biden. In a recent [post-debate poll from Data for Progress](#), 43% of voters indicated Harris was fit to run the country compared to Biden's 35%. Harris also outpolled Biden on "strength"—although both the president and vice president fall short of Trump's numbers.

In their head-to-head match-ups against Trump, Biden and Harris both scored an identical 45% to Trump's 48%, while every other prominent Democrat came in slightly below those numbers:

## Leading Democrats Fare Similarly in Head-to-Heads Against Trump

If the November 2024 election for U.S. president was being held tomorrow, and these were the candidates, who would you vote for?



*Note that - for reasons we could speculate on - this chart has been misleadingly edited to suggest a gap between Biden's performance and Harris' performance. Their margins are identical.*

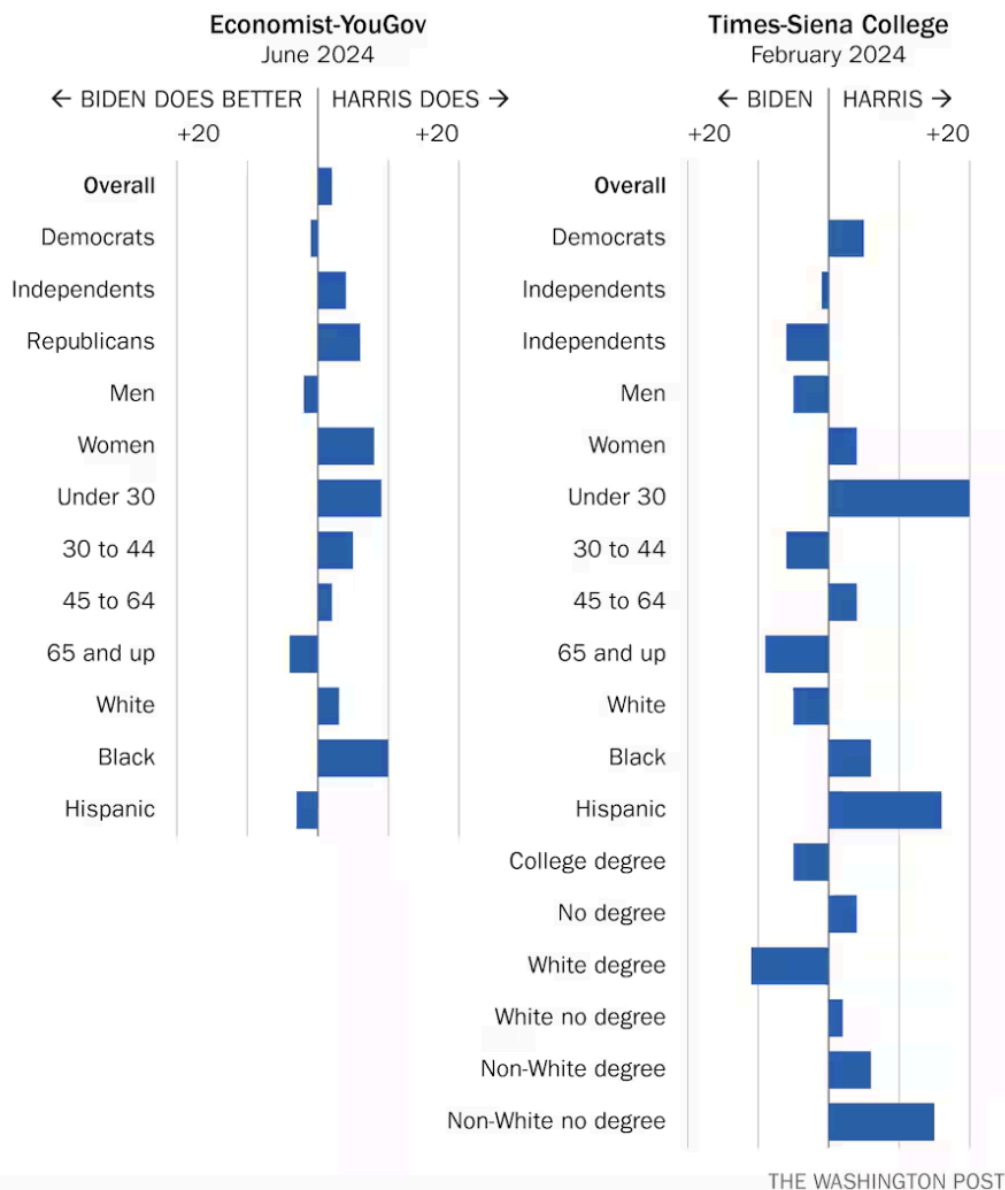
In addition, Kamala has repeatedly demonstrated that she is a strong and capable messenger on our single most-important issue: abortion. She's widely recognized as one of the administration's best messengers in taking the fight to MAGA. And - while the issue is complex and distance here is relative - she's broadly considered to be to Biden's left on Israel-Palestine, an issue where he has major vulnerabilities.

### ***Kamala has advantages with the younger/POC voters we're bleeding.***

Publicly available polling on this is all fairly hazy, because no one anticipated the depth of the crisis we'd face post-debate or the possibility that we'd be debating a new nominee. But what data we have suggests that Harris holds most of Biden's margins with the demographics where she's weaker and has significant potential to capture a higher vote share in the demographics where she's stronger.

Biden won the 2020 election by just 44,000 votes, driven by strong turnout among youth and Black and brown voters - voters he's bleeding. Polling is sparse, but a top-tier quality Times-Siena poll in February found Harris nearly 10 points ahead of Biden with Black voters. She's 15 points up with latinos. She's 20 points up with young voters. These are massive advantages.

## How Biden and Harris compare on favorability



### ***Kamala has been vetted and scrutinized; other candidates have not.***

Kamala has spent the last four years under the aggressive scrutiny of the national press corps. While she's had her share of bad-vibes stories about staffing or process, she's also held up without even a hint of scandal. This immediately sets her apart from every other candidate. We know her downsides - they're in the open already. We very much should not have the same confidence in other candidates.

***Kamala has an extra month and massive structural advantages.***

The vice president will enjoy a number of structural advantages that no other potential Democratic candidate would. She has the highest name recognition of any top contender and is [the only choice who will have immediate access to the Biden-Harris campaign's war chest of over \\$91.5 million in cash](#). Kamala has already defined herself as a champion on Democrats' strongest issues—reproductive rights and democracy—and will have a high degree of buy-in with key coalitions within the Democratic ecosystem, especially Black voters who will be essential to turn out in November.

It's worth considering the mechanics of how this would happen, and the good will that would accrue to Kamala in that moment. Biden, after serving his country his entire career and overseeing an historically successful presidential term, graciously steps back to make way for a high profile leader of the next generation. He responds to genuine, deeply felt fears about a second Trump presidency by making a dramatic maneuver designed to set up our coalition for the best chance to win. Harris, who has loyally served this administration, steps forward and commands the full attention of the nation and media, with enormous potential to set a new narrative and pave a path to victory.

Perhaps the strongest argument is not about money or narrative but time. We have less than 4 months left to win. If we unite behind Harris in July, we have an entire extra month of party unity and message unity. That's a month where we can keep the media focused on Donald Trump, Project 2025, and MAGA extremism, instead of waiting in dread for the next Biden misstep or talking about Democrats fighting it out to win the delegate count.

***Fear of racism/sexism is playing an outsized role not supported by the data.***

A major element of many elites' discomfort with Kamala is our lurking assumption that American voters penalize female and Black candidates. The data on this phenomenon is honestly mixed. We would not contend that racism or sexism don't show up within some segments of the electorate—but we would argue that the impact is marginal compared to the potential to make gains in the crucial bloc that will decide the election. Right now, this race hinges on the alienated, unenthusiastic [double-haters](#) who dislike both President Biden and Donald Trump and want an alternative choice.

Some polls put the size of this group at 25% nationally and even higher—nearly 30%—among inconsistent voters who are likely to decide the election in key battleground states. For these double-haters, vote choice is being driven not by prejudice, but by anti-enthusiasm for the two current 80-year-old white men presented as the only options. These voters are also more likely to be young, Hispanic or Black, and women in urban and suburban areas—exactly the kind of voter profile that Kamala is gaining appeal with.



## **The Kamala Scenario vs the Chaos Scenario**

We have taken the liberty of imagining these two scenarios play out:

### ***The Kamala Scenario***

In consultation with his family and advisors, President Biden decides that he will be stepping back from the campaign to devote his full attention to finishing out his term and addressing the rising risk of regional war in the Middle East. With the support of a broad coalition of elected officials and donors, he endorses Kamala Harris and asks his delegates to support her. President Biden is hailed as a modern-day Cincinnatus - the reluctant hero who took up his sword to protect democracy, delivered transformational legislative achievements, and passed the torch to a historic figure from the next generation.

The party swiftly consolidates around Kamala, who immediately kicks off a nationwide tour presenting herself as her own woman - a President for all Americans, and a commonsense candidate standing against Trump's MAGA extremism and abortion bans. Harris is able to take control of the campaign infrastructure, gets a huge money bomb of support, and quickly hits the campaign trail in key battleground states. The public breathes a sigh of relief at this shakeup of a demoralizing rematch, and Harris benefits from a goodwill bounce. In August, President Biden gives a rousing, historic speech to nominate the woman who stood by his side for the past four years. Nominee Harris comes out of the convention with momentum and a significant bump in polling, able to bring the Democratic coalition together to defeat Donald Trump. In September, former prosecutor Harris demolishes an incoherent and extremist Trump in the debate. She sails into office in a landslide, bringing with her a Democratic House and Senate capable of reforming the filibuster to codify reproductive freedom - the winning issue she spent months campaigning on.

### ***The Chaos Scenario***

In consultation with his family and advisors, President Biden decides that he will be stepping back from the campaign to devote his full attention to finishing out his term and addressing the rising risk of regional war in the Middle East. He will leave the determination of the next nominee up to the delegates, and while some party leaders support Harris, there is not unanimity. Multiple gubernatorial and Senate candidates jump into the race. July and August are consumed by ugly and protracted conflict, with a steady trickle of oppo drops targeting each candidate. The logic of a fight to secure delegates - largely party activists and insiders - will heavily favor inside strategies targeting specific factions and blocs of individuals within the national and state parties rather than external public narratives that will help us make progress for the general



election. Candidates will struggle to balance their focus between inside organizing and telling their story on the national stage, let alone taking the fight to Republicans.

Party leaders will try to minimize the fallout and put their thumb on the scale at some point, in a manner similar to the 2020 primary - but we cannot predict in advance how successful this will be, or whether they themselves will be split by divisions between different camps. Media will focus heavily on the horse race, negative stories about each candidate, and the highly controversial prospect that Democratic elites are skipping over the first Black woman vice president. Given that most of the prospective alternates are white and/or male, the racial and gender dynamics will be inescapable. Meanwhile, Trump and his allies are able to make their case to the American people uninterrupted. The fight against extremism is a footnote compared to the irresistible chaos of Democratic infighting.

After pledged delegates are released in the first round of votes, there is no clear candidate who will take the majority and claim the nomination. Superdelegates become essential to securing a win, reopening old wounds stretching back to 2016. The ultimate candidate who emerges from this will have two and a half months to build a national operation, fundraise for a billion dollar campaign, navigate legal challenges to get on ballots in key states, navigate legal challenges to get on ballots in key states, heal the divisions that have surfaced, and refocus the conversation on Trump. God help them.

We're in a terrible situation and no option is without risk. But one option clearly has more upside potential and lower risk than the others.

### **PS: If Biden Stays the Course, We Need Kamala to be Strong**

***The most likely outcome is that President Biden declines to step back. In that case Kamala's role is more crucial than ever.***

If President Biden declines to step back, Kamala's role in his campaign becomes even more important for several reasons. First, she will be the stronger communicator on the ticket - especially on our most important issue, abortion. Second, many voters will understand her to be Biden's near-guaranteed successor and will need to feel comfortable with her potential ascent to the presidency to vote for the Biden-Harris ticket. Kamala is clearly going to be doing much of the heavy lifting for the remainder of the campaign, and needs to be seen as a trusted and empowered governing partner for voters who remain skeptical of the president's abilities at his age.

***For anyone in the "President Biden is the nominee and we must rally around him" camp, it's essential that we project confidence in his selection of running mate.***

Certain operatives - including, regrettably, some affiliated with the Biden campaign - are currently defending President Biden's continuation of his campaign by quietly deriding Kamala's leadership or political capabilities. This is profoundly short-sighted and factually suspect. President Biden chose Kamala as his running mate; if he chose poorly, this is a reflection on his judgment. And because voters believe that if they vote for President Biden, they will ultimately get President Harris, attempts to build up Biden at the expense of Harris are fundamentally counterproductive.

A [post-debate survey showed six-in-ten voters](#) don't believe Biden is likely to finish another four years. These numbers are grim for the campaign, and underscore how crucial it will be to project confidence in his choice of running mate. Everyone associated with the campaign needs to act like it.

## **What to Do With This Memo**

If you accept the propositions above—that Kamala is the only viable option to succeed Biden and that if she gets the nomination, she can win - then read on.

The ultimate decisions here - for Biden to step back, for Harris to be endorsed - will be made by President Biden himself, with direct input from a fairly small set of friends, staff, donors, and political leaders. You may know some of those people, or you may know people who know those people, or you may be on a listserv with people who know someone. Right now, the most important thing to do is to make noise in support of this basic premise: Kamala is the only viable option to succeed Biden, and if she gets the nomination, she can win.

A few possible ways to do this:

1. **Push the administration to stop sidelining Kamala.** The vice president is needed more than ever to shore up President Biden's greatest vulnerabilities. Whether he withdraws or not, Democrats need someone with the energy and vitality to be visible on the campaign trail, aggressively prosecuting the case against MAGA extremism and Trump personally. We need to make it clear to the campaign that Kamala is an asset, and she needs to be more visible, more available, and more prominent in the public eye.
2. **Promote Kamala as a leader of the party and the country.** Voters believe that President Biden may not complete a second term. They need to feel confident in his chosen vice president if the ticket has any chance of defeating Donald Trump, and the Democratic ecosystem needs to embrace Kamala as a leader for the future, regardless of what choices Biden makes for himself. That means incorporating her more fully into public messaging, highlighting her accomplishments and strengths, and building platforms for her to reach coalitions and the grassroots.
3. **Be prepared to align with political and financial support.** If the day comes that President Biden decides to step back from the campaign, we need to consolidate to avoid chaos. That means being ready to quickly reissue endorsements for Harris as the

nominee, commit fundraising support, and organize to align the rest of the coalition around her.

4. **Debate over—and ultimately organize around—a new running mate.** Here's where we have the family fight—and it's a good thing! Nominee Harris will need a running mate that addresses her own vulnerabilities with the electorate, and we should all be loud in communicating what that ought to look like. This is where we can build for the future of the party by pushing for a rising Democratic star that excites and energizes after a challenging year of electoral upheavals and setbacks.

When candidate Biden selected her as a running mate in 2020, Kamala's strengths on the ticket were broadly accepted. She was viewed as young, dynamic, and historic in comparison to Biden's experience and otherwise typical demographic profile. She had the energy and communications skills to take the fight to MAGA. These strengths remain features of her candidacy today, and will take on new significance at the top of the ticket against Donald Trump. We cannot undersell the power of newness and energy in this election, especially in contrast to the state of the race today.

Consolidation around Vice President Harris will not guarantee victory in November. No option is free of risk at this point. But this is our clearest path to win. We should take it.