



KAMALA DEVI HARRIS MAKES HISTORY

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KAIVAN SHROFF | August 12, 2020



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Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden announced Senator Kamala Harris of California as his running mate in the 2020 election on Tuesday. While Harris started as an **early favorite** for the vice presidential nomination among party insiders, **recent comments** about Harris's "ambition" and attitude from high-profile party insiders left pundits second-guessing. Notably, the former prosecutor faced off with Biden and over 20 other candidates in the Democratic Primary before **dropping out** of the presidential race in December. Harris, born to an Indian mother and Jamaican father, is a historic candidate as the first Black woman and first South Asian to be

nominated for the presidential ticket. For some, it's a long-overdue acknowledgment of the critical role Black women have played in Democratic politics.

While not everyone believes Harris is the ideal **choice**, some are already crossing party and ideological lines to support the Biden-Harris ticket. For many, continued vitriol against Harris is expected — she is a prominent woman of color in politics and a moderate at a time when many young Democrats are moving **further left**. Still, even though Harris isn't from a swing state, they believe she is the candidate who can help former Vice President Biden cross the finish line this November.

Harris **began her political career** at age 39, when she was elected as the 27th district attorney of San Francisco in 2003. She went on to become attorney general of the Golden State. As the state's junior senator, Harris, now 55, **currently serves** on the Senate's Judiciary, Budget, and Homeland Security committees, in addition to the Select Committee on Intelligence. While some on the left have criticized Harris's experience as California's "top cop," others **argue** she was an exceptionally progressive district attorney. Her skills as a former prosecutor have been on display during Trump-era Senate hearings. Harris went viral for **grilling** Attorney General William Barr at the Senate hearing on Russian election interference last May and for **questioning** Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh during his Senate confirmation hearing.



Kamala Harris is currently the junior U.S. senator from California. (Biden-Harris campaign)

Harris has been on the receiving end of sexism and **racism** — often both at once. In 2013, she made national headlines when then-President Barack Obama **referred** to her as “by far the best-looking attorney general in the country.” He later called Harris to apologize for the “distracting” comment. Harris **felt** her 2020 presidential campaign also suffered from biased media coverage, citing one white reporter’s insensitive coverage of her black sorority’s event, among other examples.

Brown University Political Science Department Chair Wendy Schiller believes some of the pushback against Harris’s candidacy leading up to Tuesday’s announcement “was the

typical narrative against a strong woman who is seeking one of the highest offices in the land.” She added, “It was interpreted that way by a lot of women, particularly because the comments came most notably from [former] Senator Chris Dodd, who is an old white man.”

Fred Guttenberg, a leading gun-violence prevention advocate who forged a bond with Biden after the tragic loss of Guttenberg’s daughter Jaime, said he “was going to trust [Biden] no matter what,” but that he was “feeling happy and optimistic” after the announcement. Guttenberg, who endorsed Biden the day after he won the South Carolina primary, believes that Harris was always the vice presidential contender who excited the most people.

“I’ve always said my daughter had the greatest bullsh*t meter in the world — Kamala Harris has a really good one and she’s gonna call [Vice President Mike Pence] out,” Guttenberg said. Harris worked closely with Biden’s late son Beau and the former vice president offered counsel to Guttenberg when his daughter was murdered. “I distinctly remember Joe telling me that what always got him through was mission and purpose.”



Joe Biden calls Kamala Harris to ask her to be on the ticket. (Joe Biden Instagram)

Schiller said that in a time of social distancing and Zoom-campaigning, Harris's proven record as a telegenic communicator is a unique asset. "Harris was a good choice for Biden because...she had made her presence known both through television and digital media and had shown that she could jump through a video screen," she said. "I think it's really important, particularly in an age of COVID, when so much contact will be digital, that the running mate can project in all of these online forums."

New York Times contributor Wajahat Ali supported Massachusetts Senator **Elizabeth Warren** in the Democratic primary, but was pleased with Biden's choice. "None of us

should be surprised. I think it's a smart political move. She was a presidential candidate...she's been vetted. She's been a public servant. She is well-known, she's dynamic, she's young, she's a woman, she's Black.”

Ali said that Harris's nomination was “inspiring for him as the son of desi (South Asian) immigrants to see that a vice president reflects and **resembles some of those cultural traditions** and the identity and background of my parents — people who've been told to ‘go back where you came from’ and our food was mocked and our accents are mocked.”

However, Ali noted that identity alone is insufficient. “Quality matters, quality control matters. Nikki Haley's also desi, Dinesh D'Souza's also desi, Bobby Jindal's also desi and in the racial draft **we have gladly dropped them.**” Similarly, others argue that Harris didn't **poll strongly** among Black voters during the lead up to the primaries. That said, with a Biden-Harris Democratic ticket, “We do see the base of the Democratic Party that really has been loyal and comes out are Black voters,” Ali added.

Despite her Indian first name, not everyone is aware of Harris's mixed-identity. Mainstream media has often referred to the senator as a “Black woman,” **failing to note** her multicultural background. Her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, was originally from Chennai, India and moved to Berkeley in 1958 to pursue higher education. Her father, Donald Harris, immigrated from Jamaica in the 1960s. They met as graduate students at the

University of California-Berkeley. Both were heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement and would **bring young Kamala to protests in her stroller**. The couple divorced in 1971, with Gopalan winning custody of both daughters. “The only thing they fought about was who got the books,” Harris **wrote in her memoir**.



Kamala Harris (right), during her Howard University days. (Kamala Harris Instagram)

Harris attended the prestigious Howard University, a historically black college. “My mother understood very well that she was raising two black daughters. She knew that her adopted homeland (America) would see Maya and me as black

girls, and she was determined to make sure we would grow into confident, proud black women,” Harris wrote in her 2019 memoir *The Truths We Hold*.

“The narrative for Kamala Harris of course should expand,” Schiller said. “The campaign should very much try to make this story of a [Black] woman, but a woman also of immigrant heritage. I think the reason that they may not want to do that is because they certainly want to be responsive to anti-Black racism given the moment in history that we’re living through.”

Others believe Harris already represents her identity fully. Rajiv Bhateja, co-founder of They See Blue, a Silicon Valley-based South Asian political group focused on electing Democrats, explained, “She was closer to her mother growing up and her mother instilled a lot of South Asian values and heritage...starting with her name. I mean, her full name is Kamala Devi Harris, right?”







Kamala Harris as a child with her mother Shyamala Gopalan. (Biden-Harris campaign)

With unavoidable identity politics comes the silver-lining of serving as a symbol to young women and minorities across the country. Opal Vadhan, who is Hillary Clinton's executive assistant and previously worked on the former Democratic nominee's 2016 campaign, is excited about Harris's selection. "Growing up with two Indian immigrant parents, you were always told to be a lawyer, doctor, or accountant. Politics was just never a career path you were encouraged to take. With this decision, I'm so excited for Black and Brown girls to see themselves represented and that they too can grow up knowing they can be anything they want."

Last week, female Democratic Party leaders **started** the group We Have Her Back in anticipation that Biden's vice president pick, who he **pledged** would be a woman back in March, would face sexist attacks. The group plans to call out sexist media coverage, with organizers specifically highlighting the vice presidential selection process attracting "**disappointing**" **coverage.**" "Just this week, **a story in the LA Times** compared the VP search to the TV show *The Bachelor* saying that the woman is going to get a rose, as opposed to a real, thoughtful consideration of qualifications," said Democratic political strategist Hilary Rosen, one of the group's organizers.

“Shirley Chisholm [the first black woman elected to Congress], Geraldine Ferraro [the first woman vice presidential nominee], and Hillary Rodham Clinton [the first woman to win the popular vote for president] all broke glass ceilings and helped pave the way for this moment,” Vadhan added. “In 2016, we saw the trolls and vitriol that came about with nominating the first woman presidential candidate to a major party — **people had to make secret social media groups**. Four years later, we will all have to speak out and support Senator Harris from the sexist and racist attacks that will come her way.”



Shyamala Gopalan, who came to the United States in 1958 for higher education, marched in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. (Kamala Harris Instagram)

Some voters are crossing ideological lines to support the Biden-Harris ticket. Bhateja identifies as an Independent, but said Trump's racism and xenophobia compelled him to support Democrats in 2020.

"[Harris] was third on my list," said Rina Shah, a GOP strategist and commentator who hoped Biden would have selected either Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) or Congresswoman Val Demings (D-FL). "This is what I was nervous about. There is not a huge love for her [among Republicans] the way there would have been for somebody else." During the primary season, anti-Trump Republicans were **drawn to Senator Amy Klobuchar** (D-MN), however, Klobuchar **withdrew** from vice presidential consideration early on.

Regardless, Shah announced her intention to vote for Biden this November in a **viral** tweet: "As a lifelong Republican, I am proud to support **@JoeBiden** for President. This election is about decency, the rule of law, and the kind of America we want to pass to our kids. It's time patriotic Americans unite to put **#CountryOverParty** and vote Trump out this Nov."

Shah told *The Juggernaut* that she will join the leadership of The Lincoln Project's new Women's Coalition, which rolls out on Friday. **The Lincoln Project**, an anti-Trump group formed by senior Republican operatives, has empowered "Never Trump" Republicans across the country to support the Democratic ticket openly. Shah, who recently lost a relative to COVID-19, said she is not supporting Trump after the Republican

incumbent **dismissed** the pandemic as a Democratic “hoax.”
“There has been no regard for...the number of Americans we have lost.”

“Perfect is the enemy of democracy — I’m not even going to say ‘the good’ anymore,” Ali said. “So even though I’m more progressive than Biden-Harris, I’m also a pragmatist realizing that so much is at stake.” He said that the months leading up to the general election would serve as a key opportunity for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party to push Biden and Harris — who many see as moderate — to the left on certain issues like Medicare-for-All, Senator Bernie Sanders’s (D-VT) signature policy.

Schiller acknowledged that some have taken issue with Harris’s **policy positions and background** in law enforcement. But she does not think the choice will cost Biden many potential votes. “Unlike Bernie Sanders, who was not a supportive surrogate for Hillary Clinton in any way in 2016, Elizabeth Warren will be a tremendously supportive surrogate for Biden,” Schiller pointed out. Schiller speculated that Warren might be a contender for Senate Majority Leader if she chooses to challenge current Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) for the role. The Massachusetts Senator has **already been supporting Biden** as a key policy advisor.

Upwards of **12%** of Sanders primary supporters voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election. At the time, some similarly felt Clinton **should have picked a vice president** who

appealed more to progressive Sanders voters, instead of bilingual Virginia Senator Tim Kaine. Almost 50% of Sanders-Trump voters **disagreed that “white people have advantages.”**

As the Biden-Harris campaign continues to develop its general election strategy and platform, both candidates are likely to continue outreach across a broad spectrum — framing the election through Biden’s campaign slogan: a “battle for the soul of the nation” against Trump.

***Kaivan Shroff** is a Democratic commentator and political organizer. He serves as Senior Advisor to The Institute for Education based in Washington, D.C.*

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