



Vice President Kamala Harris speaks at a White House NCAA Sports Day event July 22 on the South Lawn of the White House. (Official White House photo/Lawrence Jackson)



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[As discussed on Friday](#), the Democrats turned the tables on the Republicans in July, changing the narrative of the campaign and unleashing some real energy visible in both the surge in fundraising and in the crowds that show up at rallies for Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. All the momentum is with the Dems right now, but the election is still a toss-up and both sides have to overcome some hurdles if they are to prevail in November.

After the assassination attempt, Donald Trump's unfavorability rate [dropped significantly](#) from 54% to 51.7% as of Aug. 8. He was still "underwater" by 8.4% with a favorability rate at 43.3%. On that same day, Aug. 8, Harris had significantly closed the gap between her unfavorability and favorability rating to only a 5.5% [underwater number](#). She had also edged in front of Trump in national head-to-head polls.

But other polling shows why Trump is still as likely to win as Harris. According to [The Hill's polling average](#), 66.7% of Americans think the country is on the wrong track, compared to only 25.0% who think it is on the right track. Harris is part of the incumbent administration and Trump has improved his favorability numbers steadily since they hit a rock bottom 34% [according to Gallup](#) in the wake of the assault on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

All the energy of recent weeks can be harnessed into a governing agenda that might, just might, help move the country beyond its current hyper-divisiveness. Trump couldn't achieve that if he wanted to and it isn't clear he wants to.

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More importantly, even when Trump got only 43.1% of the popular vote in 2020, he still captured 25 states and 232 Electoral College [votes](#). The only one of those 25 states that might be in play this year is North Carolina. Joe Biden captured five states Hillary Clinton had lost: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. All remain swing states and Nevada is likely to be up for grabs too. This will be a close election.

The problem for the Republicans is that their candidate is so thoroughly undisciplined, he can't help revisiting old conspiracy theories, reopening old wounds, [rehashing old grievances](#). His rants channel many people's frustrations — with government, with cultural elites, with the direction of society, with secularization, with globalization — and then foster the kind of easy hostility our technology amplifies with its algorithms. It is ugly, but it is effective. The forces he is channeling are powerful forces, even if he seems such an odd vessel for their political expression.

Trump's approach also has limits. A majority of Americans don't like it and a slightly larger group of Americans are just tired of it. Trump is enervating. The best thing he could do is cut a less prominent profile, but that is the one thing he seems incapable of. He thinks he's smarter than everyone and so the world is just dying for more of him. The fact that the Republican Party has turned itself into something of a cult following confirms him in his self-prejudice.

The Democrats were bound to have a struggle over the direction of the party after Biden left the stage. Would the party support Medicare for all? Would it adjust its foreign policy? Would it continue Biden's pro-labor, anti-neoliberal economic policies? We thought those debates would happen in 2028. They could have happened this year if Biden had dropped out last summer. Instead, when Biden stepped aside, the clock was ticking and Harris emerged as the focal point of party unity.



Republican presidential nominee and former U.S. President Donald Trump and Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance point to the stage during Day 1 of the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 15. (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

Questions remain. For example, Matt Stoler, director of research at the American Economic Liberties Project, asked [in an op-ed in The New York Times](#) whether Harris would continue the Biden administration's aggressive efforts to restrain corporate power. This matters to blue collar workers who have been fleeing the Democratic Party since the Democrats became the party of offshoring jobs under Bill Clinton and bailing out Wall Street during Barack Obama's presidency. Harris and Walz [went to Detroit this week](#) promising to keep Biden's more aggressive pro-worker policies.

The bigger concern is that Harris will lean into some of the more radical progressive policies that alienate large swaths of the electorate. There is a reason Republicans have [harped on Walz](#) for signing a law that requires the placement of menstrual products like tampons in every restroom at Minnesota schools: It strikes many voters

as strange, dare we say, weird. Back in February, I reviewed John Judis and Ruy Teixeira's new book [Where Have All the Democrats Gone?](#) which examined the way well-financed groups have foisted a radical cultural agenda on the Democrats on a host of issues, an agenda that alienates many working-class voters.

The war in Gaza has become another flash point for the Democrats. Protesters [interrupted Harris' speech](#) in Detroit last week. They chanted, "Kamala, Kamala, you can't hide. We won't vote for genocide." She responded, "If you want Donald Trump to win, then say that. Otherwise, I am speaking."

There is a bigger reason than helping Donald Trump to not chant about genocide in Gaza: Whatever you think about Israel's prosecution of the war in Gaza, it isn't genocide. A recent analysis of health statistics [by the Associated Press](#) showed a dramatic decrease in the number of women and children, the best statistical corollary for civilians, being killed in Gaza. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the death rates increased as the genocide progressed.

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Last week, Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri became the second member of the progressive "Squad" to [lose a primary challenge](#) to a more centrist Democrat. In June, Squad member Rep. Jamaal Bowman [lost his primary](#) in New York state. These were Democratic primaries, not general elections. There are clear limits to the appeal of progressive ideology, and Harris should pay attention to that fact.

With Trump doubling down on his base by choosing an articulate ideologue like JD Vance, Harris has the opportunity to reach for the center and win big. If she chooses, instead, to run a campaign centered on appeals to the Democratic base, it will be a very close election. All the energy of recent weeks can be harnessed into a governing agenda that might, just might, help move the country beyond its current hyper-divisiveness. Trump couldn't achieve that if he wanted to and it isn't clear he wants to. Harris has the opportunity, but there are powerful interests urging her to embrace a progressive agenda that is both unsound and unpopular.

As of today, the presidential contest is a jump ball.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)