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Harris Defies Doubters on Road to Presidential Nomination

- The vice president proved effective tactician during upheaval
- Thursday speech marks shift to more difficult campaign phase

By Akayla Gardner

(Bloomberg) -- With her keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention on Thursday, Kamala Harris is poised to cement a stunning political transformation: From a vice president whose campaigning and leadership prowess were perpetually doubted by fellow Democrats to a candidate who has taken command of a newly galvanized party.

Harris tightrope-walked a summer of upheaval. First she navigated the awkward weeks when questions simmered about President Joe Biden's electoral viability, publicly voicing her loyalty. Once he suspended his reelection campaign, Harris then set fundraising records, harnessed a social media frenzy and won over key stakeholders – including potential rivals for the nomination.

The Thursday speech also marks a transition into a more difficult phase of the campaign, when Harris will be challenged to prove her recent momentum is more than just a short-lived honeymoon powered by relief over Biden's exit.

The evening will also test whether Harris can leverage a marquee speech to win over independent and undecided voters – and offer clues about what messages her campaign will use to court them.



Kamala Harris

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Many polls now show Harris with an edge against Republican Donald Trump, meaning she is faring better than Biden did against the former president. At the convention, rank-and-file Democrats, as well as some of the party's biggest stars, have compared the energy surrounding her campaign to that of Barack Obama.

"There's a tremendous amount of pent-up demand, excitement, anxiety in the Democratic coalition," said Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, who spoke in a personal capacity. "In a short period of time, she basically filled the vacuum."

'The Underdog'

Harris still describes herself as "the underdog" – a posture that aims to create a safety net of lower expectations in a tight competition and show humility with voters still weighing their options. "We have a lot of work to do to earn the vote of the American people," Harris told reporters Sunday.

She indeed faces serious obstacles, including defending the Biden administration's economic record after years of voter discontent over high prices – all while navigating the racism and sexism that have closed doors to generations of political aspirants.

Harris has yet to give a one-on-one interview since Biden passed her the baton or roll out many detailed policy positions, which could fuel an impression of a wispy campaign. She has pledged to do an interview by the end of the month. Meanwhile, the Trump camp, which was caught flat-footed by Harris' ascension, is honing its lines of attack.

"I do, of course, expect Donald Trump to figure out how to land a political punch," said Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro at a Wednesday event hosted by Bloomberg News. "What you've seen with her is an ability to absorb the criticism."



Kamala Harris

Many voters also look more favorably on Trump's record than they did when he left office, despite the series of legal

woes that he's accumulated, including a felony conviction and a court finding him liable for sexual assault.

"Donald Trump's retroactive job rating is as high as it has ever been," said Democratic pollster John Anzalone at a Wednesday event at the DNC hosted by the University of Chicago Institute of Politics.

Yet the conditions of her nomination also offer a unique advantage: With fewer than 100 days left in the race, Harris has avoided the battle scars that a presumptive nominee is typically left with after months of bitter primary fighting and attack ads from the opposing party.

Vibe Shift

The so-called vibe shift on Harris represents an extraordinary reversal of fortune. Early in Biden's term, the vice president was given an unattractive portfolio, including leading the White House's space council and addressing root causes of migration from certain Central American countries. She became the subject of Republican attacks, as border crossings spiked and video clips of gaffes circulated.

"You're in a impossible position," said Allan Lichtman, a presidential historian, about the vice presidency. "You have to be subordinate."



Kamala Harris and Joe Biden

The negative attention manifested into anxiety that Harris could hurt Biden's reelection campaign. Last year, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senator Elizabeth Warren didn't offer outright support in interviews for Harris as the best person to remain Biden's running mate. They both later clarified those comments.

"Folks that were being haters before, they've got to respect her now," said Michael Blake, a former vice chair of the Democratic National Committee who runs the Kairos Democracy Project.

In recent months, Harris thrived addressing issues that were more popular with the Democratic base, including gun

violence prevention and abortion rights.

“Whether it is fighting to protect fundamental freedoms – including a woman’s right to make decisions about her own body – lowering the cost of prescription drugs for working families, or advancing U.S. national security interests on the world stage, Vice President Harris is proud to be a governing partner to President Biden, and together they will continue to lead the nation forward for the rest of this term,” said Ernesto Apreza, the vice president’s press secretary, in a statement.



WATCH: Big money has poured into the Harris campaign, but finance leaders are mixed about the impact of her policies on the economy, Amanda Gordon has more.

‘Tight as a Tick’

Democratic pollster [Celinda Lake](#) said that many voters, especially those under 50 years old, are eager to see more women and diverse politicians. Harris would be the first woman or Asian American to serve as president, and the second Black commander-in-chief.

Harris’ convention speech will highlight her middle-class upbringing and career as a prosecutor, while striking contrasts with Trump, according to a campaign official.

It will be a capstone to a week that began with a [valedictory address from Biden](#) and saw convention audiences hyped up by the withering critiques of Trump that [Barack and Michelle Obama](#) lobbed in their speeches.

In a race likely to be decided by slim margins in a small group of swing states, the stakes for Harris in her address are exceedingly high.

“She’s had this great run, but our numbers are much less rosy than what you are seeing in the public,” Future Forward’s Chauncey McLean said at a Monday event at the DNC hosted by the University of Chicago Institute of Politics. “We have it as tight as a tick.”

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