

05/08/2023 09:00:00 [BN] Bloomberg News

Harris Seizes Needed Role as Team Biden's Voice to Black Voters

- Vice president finds visibility addressing issues dear to base
- Early missteps, concerns about Biden's age make her GOP target

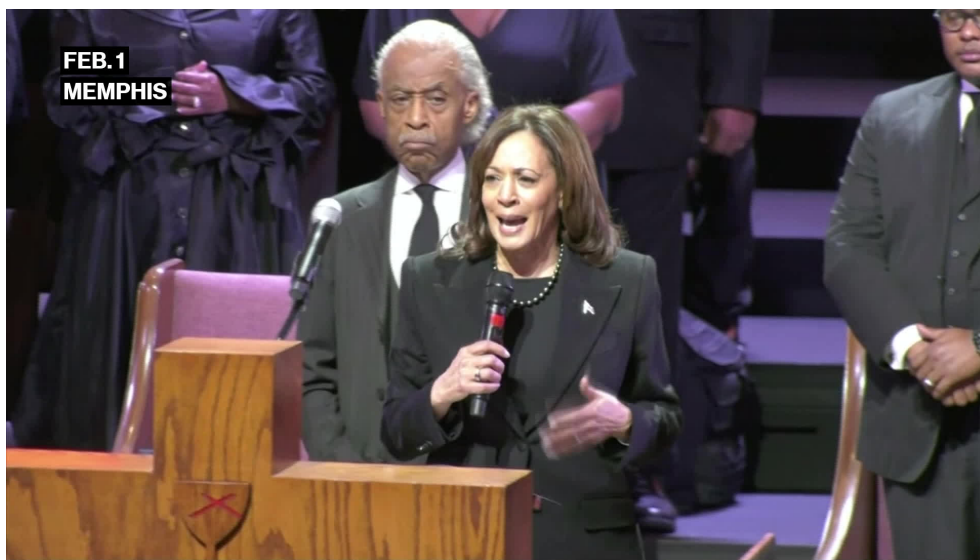
By Akayla Gardner

(Bloomberg) -- Kamala Harris began finding her footing last year with a rousing, impromptu eulogy for a Black matriarch that drew a mostly African-American audience to its feet – a task she must now replicate on a wide scale to secure President Joe Biden's reelection.

Harris, the first woman, Black and Asian vice president, was unexpectedly called on stage to speak at the funeral last May for Ruth Whitfield, an 86-year-old woman killed in a racist mass shooting in Buffalo.

"The more she talked, the more passionate and fiery she got," said civil-rights leader Reverend Al Sharpton, who called her speech an "a-ha moment" for an administration that lacked a reliable bond with the Black community. "All of us knew we were looking for something. She's become that something."

Harris is hitting some of her stride at a crucial moment as she and the president officially launch their reelection bid. Biden credits Black voters for his 2020 victory, with exit polls showing he carried 87% of the vote. But recent surveys reveal erosion in enthusiasm among the bloc, making it essential for Biden and Harris to bolster ties in the 18 months before the presidential election.



Vice President Kamala Harris speaks at the funeral service for Tyre Nichols in Memphis.

In that quest, Harris will also have to overcome some poor perceptions and low polling numbers around her time as vice president so far among the wider group of voters. Harris had just a 41% approval rate in a May 2 The Economist/YouGov poll, closely mirroring Biden's rating. But the same poll showed Harris's approval rate among Black

voters at 64%, compared to 46% for Hispanics and 34% for Whites.

The vice president has been crisscrossing the country to speak on issues such as voting rights, gun violence and abortion, important topics for the Democratic base. Last month, she completed a high-profile trip to Africa, where she pitched US investment as a bulwark against China and set the stage for Biden's own planned trip to the region later this year.

The speech in Buffalo last year marked a turning point for Harris, whose first 16-months in office were marked by struggles to navigate a portfolio that included the unenviable task of addressing migration at the Southern border. Republicans pounced on her public gaffes and she came across as overly scripted at events.

Read more about Harris

- [Harris Turns Africa Trip Into Political Boost With Black Voters](#)
- [Biden Condemns 'Shocking' Tennessee Legislature Expulsions \(2\)](#)
- [Harris Demands Justice for Russia's 'War Crimes' in Ukraine](#)
- [Harris Urges Police Overhaul in Surprise Nichols Funeral Remarks](#)

The administration has a good story to tell with a Friday Labor Department report showing Black unemployment fell to a record-low 4.7% in April, even as the economy is still gripped by inflation.

In a May 5 interview with MSNBC, Biden was told that Harris was featured in his reelection announcement video ten times.

"Vice President Harris hasn't gotten the credit she deserves," Biden said. "She was attorney general of the state of California. She has been a United States senator. She is really very, very good. And with everything going on, she hasn't gotten the attention she deserves."

Biden, 80, is the oldest president in US history and should he win reelection he would be 86 years old at the conclusion of his second term. As such, Harris, 58, has been under scrutiny as to whether she can do the job of president, so much so that comedian Roy Wood Jr. referenced it at the April 29 White House Correspondents Dinner.

"That's a disrespectful question, because nobody ever asked that question of the vice president until a woman got the job," Wood said, subtly nodding to the 90% of Black women who voted for Biden and Harris.

Representative [Jim Clyburn](#) of South Carolina, a Biden campaign co-chair, said Harris should ignore Republican attacks on her ability.

"What's happening to her is exactly what drove Black folks out of office in the 1870s," Clyburn said. "How do you come out and say 'if you reelect this president he's not going to live through his term of office?' This stuff is beyond the pale."

A DNC official denied the campaign was raising Harris's profile to counter concerns about Biden's age.



Harris speaks on reproductive freedom at Howard University in Washington, DC, on April 25.

Harris has been more visible both at home and abroad. During the Africa trip, she unveiled corporate-backed efforts to mitigate gender inequality. Visiting Asia, Harris toured the demilitarized zone in September after North Korean missile tests and in November spoke briefly with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of a summit.

Harris spoke about abortion access at her alma mater, Howard University, a historically Black college, on April 25, the day Biden announced their 2024 campaign.

Earlier in the month, she gave a fiery address at Nashville's Fisk University, a historically Black college, after two Black Tennessee lawmakers advocating for gun control after a mass shooting were expelled from the state legislature.

Harris spoke at the February funeral of Tyre Nichols, a Black man killed by Memphis police officers, urging Congress to pass police-reform legislation, a priority for Black voters and an issue Biden campaigned on that Democrats failed to deliver.

"She's never not been passionate, but I think it's just more visible and we're hearing her voice more," said Melanie Campbell, president of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. "Many times people want to treat her like she's the president, not the vice president."

Campbell said that civil rights leaders and Black women leaders told Biden and Harris that "people need to see you more."

A Democratic National Committee official credited Harris's messaging on abortion with turning out voters in 2022, helping the party outperform expectations. The official said Harris would be critical to defending abortion rights, democracy and economic-equity efforts. Her events have also drawn suburban women and young voters, two other decisive groups.

Democratic pollster Roshni Nedungadi said Harris's speeches resonate "with younger folks and with younger women."

“That’s kind of where her strengths lie going into 2024, and the types of audiences that she should be really leaning in on,” she said.

Harris’s allies say her early stumbles were unfairly magnified by her historic position.



Biden and Harris arrive at an event in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, DC, on May 1.

She has leaned into her identity as a means of reconnecting with voters, something she previously shied away from at times.

Following the April 25 announcement, the Biden campaign ran ads in battlegrounds including Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, states that have cities with large Black populations that could tilt electoral results.

NAACP President Derrick Johnson said he hopes Harris stays visible. The administration “must see the asset that she brings to the public discourse,” he said.

To contact the reporter on this story:

Akayla Gardner in Washington at agardner81@bloomberg.net

To contact the editors responsible for this story:

Mario Parker at mparker22@bloomberg.net

Meghashyam Mali