

Critical Assessment of Kamala Harris for Vice President

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*The Vice Presidency has always gotten a degree of bad press in the US political system. Its ineffectuality is sometimes lost on the occupant, though not on John N. Garner, who [considered](#) it “not worth a bucket of warm spit.” (R. G. Tugwell in *The Brains Trust* suggests that the measure “quart” was used.) Two terms as President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second fiddle was something he considered “the worst thing that ever happened to me”, occupying an office that was “a no man’s land somewhere between the legislative and executive branch.” He regretted giving up the heftier role as Speaker of the House.*

Joe Biden, having himself occupied that spittoon of an office for eight years during the Obama administration, has now found the person he hopes will do the same for him. That candidate, Kamala Harris, had been an early Democratic contender for main billing, but the electoral law of entropy struck her down early. In March, when she announced her withdrawal from the race, she was careful to keep her hat in the ring of favour, [endorsing](#) Biden as the presumptive nominee with her own lacing of fiction.

“There is no one better than Joe to steer our nation through these turbulent times, and restore truth, honour and decency to the Oval Office.”

The announcement propelled pundit land to chorus with bone weary predictions and assessments, some of which might prove, come November, to be merely astrological. The fortissimo score that is being played through is that of Harris’s moderation and safe bearing. The America of Donald Trump is dangerous and immoderate; Harris offers a tepid corrective, one that will see a Bourbon restoration rather than inspired reform. She “can appeal to voters in key swing states like Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania,” [suggests](#) Thomas Gift, director of the Centre on US Politics at UCL. She also measures up in the identity stakes, “the first African-American and Asian-American selected as VP candidate for a major party”.

The commentary on her selection is heavy with the centrist tag, one that seeks to push the stone throwing radicals out while supposedly embracing voters who steered to Trump in 2016. For the *Los Angeles Times*, Biden’s [choice of Harris](#) “set a marker for how he believes Democrats can win – both in this election and in the future – with a multiracial coalition that can excite voters, but a centre-left brand that steers clear of the most far-reaching progressive demands.”

Ed Kilgore, writing in *New York* magazine, noted these points in 2019. She is “disciplined”;

she is the candidate of “moderation – or some would say, lack of courage”. Where she is seen as radical is through no doing of her own. As Elizabeth Weil [put it](#), “Harris’s demographic identity has always been radical” while her record in office was marked by avoiding “saying or doing much that could be held against her.”

These are not exactly promising attributes in populist times. The Democrats risk doing, as Ted Rall [warns](#), of making the same mistake they did with Hillary Clinton. Picking Harris is a suggestion to the left base of the Democratic Party to “drop dead”. Biden’s “centrist establishment handlers view Hillary Clinton’s defeat in 2016 as historically anomalous rather than evidence of a flawed strategy.” Identity politics becomes the substitute for policy.

This suggests that little in the way of change will be forthcoming on a Biden-Harris ticket. Harris is branded as an institutional figure (thirteen years in public office, spent as District Attorney in San Francisco and Attorney General of California), one who, [according](#) to family friend Lateefah Simon, chose to “work within some of the most systematically racist institutions in the country” while her sister, Maya, became the enterprising advocate.

The institutional moorings of the presumptive VP-nominee is seen as a strength, till you realise that Trump’s victory in 2016, and his appeal to the country’s marked rages, were of an anti-institutional flavour. What he has done during his tenure has been to trash them, to break the Republic, assisted by his opponents who have done little in the way of addressing the country’s ills. (Coronavirus has, and is doing, the rest.) A ticket with Harris on it is a promise to Make America the Same Again, a return to political recycling.

Establishment Democrats are certainly happy about “no risk” Harris. President Obama’s former national security adviser Susan Rice enthusiastically [pointed out](#) that any Republican attacks on Biden’s choice was always going to focus on whether they were “left and socialist. It’s not true. That is not who Kamala Harris is. And it’s not who Joe Biden is.”

Much analysis on the Harris pick soon turns into waffle and tripe. Former Republican staffer and communications boffin Drew Holden [picks up](#) on the “moderate and centrist” theme in the Democrat advertising strategy, but insists that she is “among the most liberal in Congress”. This conclusion is not reached through teasing out any substantive political philosophy. Holden is a strategist in political communication, and is happy to bore us with “Ideology-Leadership” charts featuring Harris ([spot the “purple triangle”](#)) as scoring as an extreme liberal on “our liberal-conservative ideology score”. More interesting is [the view held](#) by the editors of the conservative *National Review* that Harris “is a moderate autocrat”, a “moderate anti-Catholic bigot” and a “moderate monopolist on health care”. Moderation is the new extremism.

Stool water and slush continue to mark the issue about what constitutes wings of US politics. Barack Obama suggested in 2004 that there was no “liberal” or “conservative” America, merely the “United States of America.” Gore Vidal’s idea of two right wings holding the US political cosmos together remains the most pertinent. There are other iterations of the theme, which focus on the business element so crucial to the timbre of the election system. A business civilisation will only tolerate the parties of business. No divvying-up-the-wealth populist is ever going to be allowed to get by the banking mentality that governs the DNC-RNC duopoly. He can certainly, as Trump has tried to do, pretend to drain the fetid swamp, with the natural inclination to fill it with his own brand of crony. The rest is reality television chaos.

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