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Harris Was Hamstrung by Caution. Now She's the Democrats' Driving Force.

Deferential approach to Biden and early missteps gave way to sharper skills, business ties; a turning point with abortion fight

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In her first months as vice president, Kamala Harris's staff faced a dilemma: When a military officer saluted her as she boarded Air Force Two, should she salute back?

Harris's predecessors—including Joe Biden when he was vice president—routinely saluted back. But Nancy McEldowney, then her national security adviser, explained that military protocol didn't require her to do so given that Harris wasn't commander in chief and not in the military chain of command. Doing so could make Harris look like she was trying to inflate her role, former administration officials said.

Boarding one of her first flights on Air Force Two, Harris skipped the salute. Conservative commentators seized on the moment and accused her of disrespecting the military. Soon after, aides were told that Harris would salute going forward. An aide wrote up a memo on proper saluting protocol—including pictures of previous presidents who had gotten it wrong—and the vice president even practiced the gesture in private, people familiar with the matter said.

“She really wanted to do the right thing and did not want to be out of step either with military protocol or with perceptions of her role as vice president,” McEldowney told *The Wall Street Journal*, adding that Harris has “deep respect” for military service members.

The deliberations show how a cautious approach to decisions big and small became a defining characteristic of Harris's vice presidency. She also was wary of offering her own policy views and in building out her political infrastructure. Much of her behavior has been driven by a desire not to overshadow President Biden and to demonstrate loyalty to a man she vigorously attacked during the 2020 Democratic primary.

Her caution was exacerbated by a West Wing that at times showed skepticism about her abilities and assigned her thankless roles, such as addressing the root causes of migration,

which became a larger problem during her tenure. The results were so rocky that some Democratic lawmakers and donors questioned keeping Harris on the ticket—and later floated lesser-known governors to replace Biden after his abysmal debate performance against former President Donald Trump.

Now, Harris has unexpectedly emerged as the Democratic Party's potential savior. Unshackled from the pressure to keep the focus on the president, Harris has rapidly ascended. Years of learning on the job have made her sharper and more comfortable in the spotlight. And as Biden's own liabilities became untenable, they dwarfed her shortcomings.

Harris is also benefiting from the relatively short window she faces for intense scrutiny before Election Day—and from a party desperate to rally around a candidate.



Harris in January 2023 with President Biden at the White House. PHOTO: SARAH SILBIGER/PRESS POOL

Some allies say the difference is simply allowing Harris to enter the spotlight. After a 2022 meeting with Harris on reproductive rights, Patty Pansing Brooks, then a Democratic state senator in Nebraska, said she walked away feeling that the White House had “not really put her out in public as much as they might have.”

Current and former aides said Biden's team didn't actively try to minimize Harris, but also didn't go out of its way to lift her up. The most senior levels of the White House made little effort to elevate Harris, 59, because there was no serious internal discussion that Biden, now 81, wouldn't run for a second term.

They ignored, and in some cases sought to play down, all the signs that emerged as early as 2021 that aging was taking its toll on the oldest president in U.S. history. Harris strongly defended Biden in public against criticisms of his mental acuity and stamina.

This account of how Harris went from one of the most unfavorably viewed vice presidents in decades to the party's energizing force is based on interviews with nearly 50 current and former administration officials, lawmakers, foreign officials, donors and others who know her.

A spokesman for the vice president said she had “fought from day one” to improve Americans' lives, citing her work on child tax credit payments and the removal of lead pipes. To address Harris's cautious approach, the White House referred the Journal to Sen. Mark Warner (D., Va.), who worked with Harris on the Senate Intelligence Committee. “I found her attention to detail to be an asset,” Warner said.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates said the vice president has been a “critical governing partner” and that her “bold leadership and counsel have been central to historic achievements,” including a \$1 trillion infrastructure package and opposition to abortion bans.

Early scrutiny

Biden's treatment of Harris was ultimately not so different from how he himself had been treated as vice president during President Barack Obama's administration. But the expectations for Harris had been different. Not only was she the first Black woman to serve as vice president, but Biden had promised during the campaign to be a bridge to a new era of Democratic leaders. Many thought he would start with his vice president.



Harris at the 2020 Democratic National Convention with Jill Biden, Joe Biden and Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff. PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Harris also made her own missteps, fumbling key comments, including on the border, coming off as overly scripted in some meetings with foreign officials and showing little progress on initiatives she asked to take on, such as advancing voting rights legislation. As

recently as last fall, a CBS News-YouGov poll found that just 14% said they were enthusiastic about Harris serving as Biden's No. 2.

Over time, Harris notched wins, though they did little to elevate her public standing. Her aggressive campaigning on abortion rights in 2022 helped Democrats outperform expectations in midterm elections that fall. She also worked to bolster her foreign policy bona fides, traveling to more than 20 countries and meeting one-on-one with world leaders, and to establish relationships with business and labor leaders.

A Journal poll in late July conducted after Biden dropped out of the race found Harris's favorability rating had risen to 46%—up 11 points just since the start of that month.

“When you work for an 80-year-old, you know, who's president of the United States, you have to be prepared to be president at any moment. So she was learning on the job,” said Ashley Etienne, Harris's communications director in 2021. “Now you see her on stage, and you're like, ‘It's all clicking.’ ”

In offering Harris the job, Biden had told Harris he wanted her to be the first and last in the room when he made major decisions.

But her staff in the early months was stunned by the amount of scrutiny of Harris and her operation. As the first Black woman in the role, Harris already was facing racist and sexist attacks. Every staff departure drew attention to the level of turnover in her office. Conservatives, fueled by Trump's suggestions that Biden would leave office prematurely and put Harris in charge, suggested she was lying in wait to take over.

The scrutiny fed the caution from Harris, who had spent four years in Washington as a California senator when she was sworn in, and her aides. Her team tried to avoid posting photos from joint events she did with Biden, where the “President of the United States” seal on the lectern she was standing behind was clearly visible, people familiar with the operations said. In preparing speeches and talking points, Harris made a point of ensuring her words would align with the president's, often asking her staff, “How is he talking about that?” Her team waited for Biden to issue his nightly schedule and statements before sending out Harris's.



Harris before a reproductive-freedoms event in January in Wisconsin. PHOTO: SARA STATHAS FOR WSJ

Some former aides also felt Harris's team held back from moves that could emphasize the 22-year age gap between the vice president and her boss. One former aide recalled Harris running the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in February 2021, flanked by Secret Service—a video of which went viral, with TMZ likening her workout to the training montage in “Rocky.” Harris, the aide noted, later took to working out indoors.

For her staff, Harris's cautious approach could mean extensive grilling. The former California attorney general often cross-examines and second-guesses them, even over minor decisions—which some aides said contributed to staff turnover.

She hand-edits her speeches with a pen and substitutes her favored words, and prefers to understand a policy down to its intricacies before weighing in on it, aides said. A former aide recounted Harris asking her team, an hour before she was set to deliver a speech for Veterans Day where she planned to mention the plot number of a veteran's grave at Arlington Cemetery, to find the section number, too.

Some longtime Harris allies were surprised by the level of caution she exercised on the job given that she had shown a sharper edge while serving in Congress. In the first meeting of the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2017, then-Chairman Richard Burr (R., N.C.) was going around the room to introduce new members when he got to Harris. Burr struggled to pronounce her first name, according to people familiar with the meeting. “I know you told me how to pronounce it,” he apologized. “Oh well, I'll just call you Senator Harris.”

Harris, who had been a senator all of a few days at that point, shot back, “No problem. I'll just call you Dick.” Burr didn't respond to a request for comment.

Brewing tension

In her first public assignment, in March 2021, Biden tasked Harris with diplomatic efforts to address the causes of migration—a similar role to the one he had held as vice president.

But the problem had worsened. The number of migrants crossing the border illegally was surging, with a record number of unaccompanied minors among them. Politically, the issue had grown more contentious since the Obama administration.

Harris hadn't expected the assignment, people familiar with the discussions said, and it was met with confusion from her team, who felt Biden hadn't thought through what it might mean for her politically. Her aides sought to define the role as specifically as possible in an effort to avoid Harris being labeled as the border czar for the administration. But the job they settled on—addressing the root causes of migration from certain Central American countries—didn't keep Republicans from tying Harris directly to the border and using that label.



Harris at a news conference with Alejandro Giammattei, then president of Guatemala, in 2021. PHOTO: JACQUELYN MARTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In June 2021, Harris traveled to Mexico and Guatemala to dissuade migrants from crossing the border into the U.S. “Do not come,” she declared. Progressives and human-rights groups criticized her for discouraging migrants facing instability from legally seeking asylum, and compared the declaration to Trump-era policy.

The episode inflamed tensions between Harris's shop and the West Wing. Biden advisers had encouraged Harris to make that declaration, people familiar with the discussions said, apparently not understanding that the message—which the White House had issued before—would cut more deeply coming from the daughter of two immigrants, her father from Jamaica and her mother from India.

Harris focused on asking the private sector for pledges to invest in Central America, an effort that now has \$5.2 billion in commitments.

Tension also brewed between the vice president's team and Susan Rice, Biden's domestic policy adviser who was taking on a bigger role behind the scenes to help manage the border. Rice was critical of Harris's work in some meetings with White House staff, people familiar with the discussions said.

Rice in a statement praised Harris's leadership on the migration issue and said, "I was proud to work with her on those aspects of the administration's broader immigration policy."

Doug Emhoff, the second gentleman, complained that year that the border assignment amounted to a "punishment" for the vice president, according to a person familiar with the conversation. A spokesman for Emhoff declined to comment.



Susan Rice, Biden's domestic policy adviser, at the Capitol in 2021. PHOTO: STEFANI REYNOLDS/BLOOMBERG NEWS

There was also baggage left over from the heated 2020 primary, during which Harris had made pointed attacks on Biden over his civil rights record, current and former administration officials said.

At a happy hour in the early years of the administration, a former administration official witnessed an exchange between two colleagues, one of whom had worked for the Biden campaign and the other for the Harris campaign. Referring to what they had been doing during the presidential race, the Biden staffer joked to the Harris staffer: "I was trying to elect Joe Biden. You were calling him a racist."

Harris had come into the job with extensive expertise on law enforcement, criminal justice, maternal health and other issues, but little foreign policy experience beyond her time serving on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

In 2021, an exchange between Harris and a student over Israel set off a cleanup effort at the White House. A student asked Harris about the “ethnic genocide” Israel was carrying out against Palestinians, telling her: “I feel like there’s a lack of listening.” Harris responded, “Your voice, your perspective, your experience, your truth cannot be suppressed, and it must be heard.”

Harris’s staff, concerned about any hint of criticism of Israel, immediately began contacting the heads of top pro-Israel organizations, seeking to clarify that Harris wasn’t endorsing the student’s claim of ethnic genocide. Her spokeswoman issued a statement saying the vice president “strongly disagrees” with the characterization. Some activists now say those comments, showing empathy for Palestinians, are more in line with the views of key Democratic voters who have been frustrated with Biden.

Harris worked hard to deepen her expertise, meeting with more than 150 world leaders. At a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during the Munich Security Conference in February 2022, the setup was relatively informal, meaning Harris didn’t have a briefing book to refer to for talking points.

“She knew the material and was quite specific,” said Oana Lungescu, who was NATO spokeswoman at the time. “It was very wide ranging and substantive, very action-oriented.”



Harris met with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Munich in 2022. PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/PRESS POOL

Other foreign officials said Harris often seemed reluctant to risk going beyond her brief or making a mistake. “She was good on the pre-agreed topics and talking points. She was not really confident freewheeling around geopolitics and global strategy,” said one former Western official who met with Harris early in her vice presidency. “No one is quite sure where her instincts lie.”

An aide to Harris said she counsels the president on foreign policy in private.

Turning point

In June 2022, Harris was on Air Force Two on her way to Illinois to give a speech about maternal health when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The vice president read the decision and immediately began revising her planned remarks, according to White House officials. That marked a turning point in her vice presidency, elevating her public role on behalf of the administration on an issue she was well-versed in.

“It was just a shift in energy,” said Jamal Simmons, Harris’s communications director at the time. “She already owned that real estate. She wasn’t trying to purchase it.”

Harris quickly proved herself a forceful communicator on the issue, and the Biden team took notice. Even before the Supreme Court decision was handed down, she had begun meeting with abortion rights activists, legal experts and state elected officials from around the country.

Polls were showing the economy as the priority issue in the looming midterm elections, where Democrats were bracing themselves for major losses. But Harris continued to campaign aggressively on abortion rights, and her efforts appeared to pay off. In November, Democrats blunted what some had predicted would be a red wave, with abortion widely credited as galvanizing Democrats to head to the polls.

Biden, though, viewed Democrats’ success in the midterms as a direct endorsement of his own leadership, and it escalated his interest in pursuing a second term.



Harris, with the first lady, the president and Emhoff, campaigned for abortion rights in Manassas, Va., in January.

PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The public, too, was still not seeing Harris's leadership. One former aide recalled traveling home for Thanksgiving after a grueling, sleepless period in which Harris was doing four events a week—only to have his mother ask him, “Why don't we ever see the vice president?”

Harris pushed to develop relationships with labor leaders and with lawmakers, including inviting all the women of the Senate to her residence. Starting in early 2022, Harris had begun hosting intimate dinners—typically fewer than 10 people—at her residence to deepen relationships with business leaders, including Karen Lynch of CVS Health, Ryan McInerney of Visa and Michele Buck of Hershey.

The dinners, which often stretched to three hours and were organized by investment banker Blair Effron, covered topics including infrastructure funding, interest rates, affordable housing and tariffs, with a major theme revolving around how the economy was impacting businesses and employees, attendees said. Several attendees described Harris as authoritative and personable, and said they were pleasantly surprised by how much she wanted to listen.

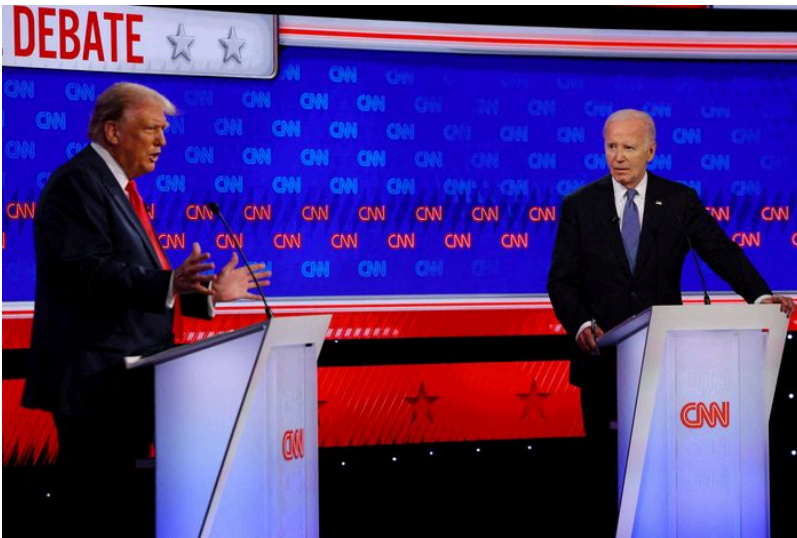
New enthusiasm

In April 2023, Biden announced that he would seek another term, with Harris as his running mate. A three-minute video his campaign released showed the president and vice president striding side by side and featured multiple clips of Harris smiling and hugging constituents—but none of her speaking.

In polls, a majority of Americans said they didn't approve of Biden's performance and raised deep concerns about his age and fitness for office. The rematch between him and Trump was shaping up to be one of the lowest-enthusiasm races in recent history.

The appetite for Harris wasn't much better. Top Democratic lawmakers and donors for months questioned her future, saying privately they didn't think she had used her platform effectively.

Then on June 27, in a 90-minute debate with Trump, Biden repeatedly lost his train of thought, confusing his words and staring with his mouth agape. The performance stunned even some of his closest allies and set off an instant panic across the Democratic Party.



Former President Donald Trump and President Biden debated in June. PHOTO: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

Harris immediately got on TV to defend the president. “Joe Biden is extraordinarily strong,” she said on CNN.

Harris’s defense of the president won her praise from his allies. But some Democrats saw something else: a well-spoken, vigorous Harris, who was ably deflecting questions about her boss’s health and pivoting to attacks on Trump—precisely what Democrats had hoped to see Biden do in the debate.

As Democratic lawmakers began to call for Biden to withdraw from the race, Harris’s allies scrambled to make the case for her behind closed doors. Allies described her as a “loyal governing partner” and a “strong and capable messenger on our single most-important issue: abortion,” according to a document reviewed by the Journal.

Biden’s advisers were privately expressing skepticism about Harris’s ability to win as they sought to justify the president staying in the race, according to people familiar with the discussions.

In a memo sent to the president’s donors and supporters days after the disastrous debate, Rob Flaherty, a top Biden campaign official, insisted that Biden would remain the nominee and included a chart from a recent poll meant to illustrate that Biden was better positioned to beat Trump than other Democrats—including Harris. The email raised eyebrows among Harris’s advisers.

On July 21, Biden announced he would withdraw from the race and endorsed Harris as the party’s nominee. He had told her the news hours before he went public.

Some allies said they felt Biden’s endorsement vindicated her approach to the job, believing her caution throughout the years to showcase her loyalty to Biden had likely made it easier for the president to back her.

In a memo circulated that day, her allies said Harris's relative youth "can make the issue of age and fitness a liability for Trump." She began holding rallies that turned out thousands of supporters across the country.

Harris clinched the Democratic nomination two weeks later.



Harris at a campaign rally this month in Las Vegas. PHOTO: JULIA NIKHINSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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