Tuesday, Aug. 20, 2024 / What kind of Democrat should Kamala Harris be?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Anyone watch the DNC last night?

*<CLIP> FERRIS BUELLER’S DAY OFF:   
 BEN STEIN: Bueller? Bueller?*

*CLASSMATE: Um, he’s sick.*

SCORING IN—TRIANGLE TIME

SEAN: If you didn’t, lemme catch you up. People quoted rappers.

*<CLIP> SHAWN FEIN: In the words of the great American poet, Nelly, ‘It’s getting hot in here!’*

SEAN: People quoted ballers.

*<CLIP> STEVE KERR: In the words of the great Steph Curry, we can tell Donald Trump ‘Night, night!’*

SEAN: And there were *way* too many people.

*<CLIP> KATHY HOCHUL: New York’s motto is ‘Excelsior!’ – Ever upward! – and Trump takes us ever downward.*

SEAN: What there wasn’t a lot of was policy. Not a lot of talk about what kinda president Kamala Harris will be. So on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna hear from someone who has some strong opinions on what kind of president Kamala Harris should be. And he thinks she should be more of an Obama than a Biden.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> BIDEN at 2024 DNC: I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my career …*

[THEME]

SEAN: Jonathan Chait is a political columnist at *New York* magazine, and any political columnist could tell you it’s Kamala Time. Yet! Chait just wrote about 6,500 words comparing Barack Obama’s presidency to Joe Biden’s. We … uh … we asked him why?!

CHAIT: I think the Democratic Party made a huge mistake over the last eight years in convincing itself that the Obama presidency was a disappointment or even a failure. And I think this wrong decision that the party made has had a series of unfortunate effects on its decisions that I try to trace over the last eight years, and has brought us to the current point where that's the decision point that Harris is facing – whether she should essentially resuscitate the Obama model or embrace the idea that Obama was a failure and chart a course favored by the Obama skeptics.

SEAN: It's interesting to hear you say that. I think a lot of people in our audience may not be aware that –- within the Democratic Party, conversations around the party – people see the Obama years as some kind of failure. I was in a movie theater last night, Jonathan, and Obama popped up on the screen for a bit in a documentary, and there was, like, an audible sigh of elation in the theater. Where is the argument – that this, this two term presidency was somehow a failure – where is that – being had and what's what's it grounded in?

CHAIT: It's very interesting because it's a top down phenomenon that has not filtered into the party rank and file. And that's one of the interesting phenomena that I describe in the story that the Democratic voters still love Obama, still think Obama was great. It's, it's an elite-driven phenomena to decide that his presidency was a failure.

[*<CLIP> RISING YOUTUBE TALK SHOW, 2020:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7zwezDQyeE) *He presents himself as this figure faced against these innumerable odds, and its very dismissive and absolving of himself of so many decisions he made throughout his presidency….*

CHAIT: And this began during his presidency, when Obama had a fairly chilly relationship with ~~the~~ what they called the professional left, which was at the time a very embryonic formation of, kind of, progressive activist groups and intellectuals in their orbit. And then when Hillary Clinton lost in 2016, a lot of those people decided that this was an indictment of the entire Obama style – the entire Obama presidency.

[*<CLIP> YOUNG TURKS, 2016:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNZmXhxuThU&t=178s) *Why did only 65 percent of Latino voters vote for the Democratic candidate? Well let me show you immigrants deported under the last two administrations. Well George Bush deported a lot of people, 2 million, oof. Guess who broke his record? Barack Obama.*

CHAIT: And then the frustrations they had with Obama began to take on a different and more specific form.

SEAN: How does this perception that he was maybe not left enough stack up against some of his major accomplishments, namely Obamacare.

CHAIT: Yeah, I mean, one of the things I try to argue in this story is that Obama had an incredible array of domestic policy accomplishments.

SCORING IN—Hopeful Progress

CHAIT: Obamacare is the most well known. And Obamacare itself is, you know, a whole package of reforms. It's a gigantic expansion of Medicaid.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: Before expansion most adults without children or disability won’t eligible at all, no matter how low their income..”*

CHAIT: It's a regulation and subsidy of the private insurance market. It had nationalization of the student loan industry.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: If you tweet, use the hashtag #dontdoublemyrate. Don’t double my rate!*

CHAIT: They closed the Medicare donut hole. It probably there was more in Obamacare than the entire Biden presidency.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Come on.*

CHAIT: But they also had an economic rescue effort, which was of historic size. They had, they bailed out Detroit and probably saved the entire Midwest. They passed the Dodd-Frank reforms. They had the, at the time, the largest green energy stimulus of all time. Which led to the first global climate treaty. And a lot of other sort of medium sized accomplishments that I think people would be celebrating if they were thinking of them. But a lot of that has kind of faded from memory.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: If I had told you eight years ago that America would reverse a great recession, reboot our auto industry…*

CHAIT: And one argument I have is that because there was so much of it, it's it's kind of like Trump's misconduct. There's so much you can't keep it all in your head. And therefore it's easy to think that there wasn't very much of it.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: If I had told you we would win marriage equality and secure the right to health insurance for another twenty million of our fellow citizens. If I had told you all that you might have said our sights were set a little too high.*

SCORING OUT

CHAIT: I'm not writing this piece, you know, for Barack Obama. So I'm not saying in this piece that everything Obama did was right. One of his major mistakes was to get behind Hillary Clinton in 2016 instead of Joe Biden. Joe Biden thinks he would have won in 2016. And I think Biden is right about that. So that was, that was a significant error on Obama's part. But the conclusion was that Hillary Clinton was repudiated as a repudiation of Obama, as if Obama himself was on the ballot in 2016. And a lot of the indictments I've read of Obama read almost as if Trump literally beat Barack Obama in 2016. But of course, if Obama had been permitted to run by the Constitution, he would have wiped the floor with Donald Trump.

*<CLIP> GET OUT: By the way I would have voted for Obama a third term if I could.*

CHAIT: It's just that Hillary Clinton was a very poor politician and, and Obama was a good one. So, so that error is on Obama's shoulders, but it doesn't, I don't think, negate any of the accomplishments of the administration itself, but it, but it indicts his succession management.

SEAN: Since you mentioned Joe Biden might have beat Donald Trump, I think we should talk about Joe Biden running against Donald Trump in 2020 briefly here. Did he do it as a Obama moderate? Did he do it, as you know, left of Obama? And if so, how did that sort of evolution transpire?

CHAIT: This is a good point to pick up the story of where the anti Obama campaign went during the Trump era. So it started off with this, you know, intellectual campaign to, argue against Obama and argue for a different way. And there was a lot of money going into thinktanks universities magazines, opinion writing, pressing this argument against Obama and quote unquote, neoliberalism. And this had a huge effect on the environment of the Democratic primary in 2020. All the candidates assumed, as a result of this campaign, that the party had totally repudiated Obama liberalism, as you know, was now racing left. And the whole primary was this race to the left to to in some ways explicitly or implicitly repudiate what Obama had done and, and, and just go as far left as they could.

*<CLIP> JULIAN CASTRO, 2020: My plan includes getting rid of section 1325 of the immigration nationality act. When someone comes across the border not to criminalize desperation – To treat that as a civil violation and …*

JONATHAN: And a lot of the positions they adopted were toxic, just extraordinarily unpopular.

*<CLIP> CNN MODERATOR: Raise your hand if government, if your government plan would provide coverage for undocumented immigrants.” [Cheering]*

CHAIT: You can even see the damage to that, to Kamala Harris, that she was probably the greatest victim of this campaign because she was pulled way, way to the left of where she started in the campaign. She had to repudiate her history as a prosecutor ...

*<CLIP> HARRIS: The bottom line is the buck stops with me and I take full responsibility for what my office did …*

CHAIT: And she started talking about defunding the police …

*<CLIP> HARRIS: When you have many cities that have one third of their entire city budget focused on policing we know that is not the best way or the right way to achieve safety…*

CHAIT: Those are to this day her greatest liabilities. The survivor of that episode was Joe Biden. Joe Biden was offline. Joe Biden was too uncool to even know what everyone else thought they knew about the future of the Democratic Party. And the activists all assumed that Joe Biden was yesterday's news anyway, so they weren't even really bothering to pressure him because they just assumed he was going to fade away because he was, he was yesterday's man. But he wasn't yesterday's man. The Democratic Party's base hadn't moved very far. They still were in the same kind of center left place for the most part, as they were under Obama, and they still liked Obama a lot. So Biden, in his connection to Obama and Obama liberalism, made him the most popular candidate in the race. And Biden won handily. But then he made this kind of strange decision to act as if he had been defeated.

SEAN: <chortles>

SCORING IN—ELEVEN STEP

CHAIT: So where whereas almost every candidate moves to the center after the primary, Biden moved away from the center.

SCORING BUMP

CHAIT: One thing they did was to start using, race conscious rhetoric. So I'll give you a counterexample. First, when Obama passed the stimulus, someone came up to Michelle Obama and said, ‘Hey, this is the greatest, anti-poverty legislation we've had in decades!’ And and she said “Shhh!”

SEAN: [laughs]

CHAIT: The reason she said that was they didn't want this to be seen as something for poor people.   
  
SEAN: Mmmm.  
  
CHAIT: They wanted to be portrayed as something for the broad middle class.

*<CLIP> OBAMA, 2009: So unlike the tax cuts we’ve seen in recent years, the vast majority of these tax cuts will go not to the wealthiest Americans, but to the middle class…*

CHAIT: And the same was true of Obama's approach on on race issues. He knew that a lot of his measures had a really important racial equity focus, right? You know, black people are underprivileged compared to white people. By by almost every, you know, major social and economic dimension. So anything you do that transfers resources from rich to the poor. And Obama did quite a bit of that benefits black people. But he wasn't saying that. The people who were saying that were his enemies. Right? It was like Rush Limbaugh saying health care is reparations. Health care is for black people. Health care is punishing the white people. Obama didn't want to say anything like that because he knew the politics were bad. Under Biden, they started following the advice of people on the left and specifically saying we are advancing racial equity and all these policies when the goals could have just as easily been sold in different terms.

*<CLIP> BIDEN 2021: Black and Latino Americans are dying of COVID 19 at rates of three times that of white Americans. It’s not white Americans’ fault but its just a fact. And Americans now know it, especially younger Americans…*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: I mean, there's Democrats out there, even, you know, reporters out there who claim that Joe Biden may have accomplished as much as any Democrat since FDR. I saw Nancy Pelosi argue that he should have a place on Mount Rushmore.

*<CLIP> NANCY PELOSI: Such a consequential president – a Mt. Rushmore kind of president of the United States…*.

SEAN: I take it you disagree.

CHAIT: That would be kind of ridiculous. I mean, so he moved rhetorically to the left, but he didn't actually achieve very much. So progressives seem to want to believe that he did what he said, or are sort of acting as if he had the FDR-sized presidency that he hoped to to build, but it's just not the case.

SEAN: I mean, and one thing we should acknowledge here is that he's a pretty unpopular president.

CHAIT: He's a deeply unpopular president, and some of that is his fault. Some of that isn't his fault. But one of the really strange things about the way the critique is played out in the current election is that progressives are acting as if he's super popular. They've been writing a flurry of columns warning Kamala Harris not to abandon Bidenomics, and not to make the mistake of doing what Obama did as if Obama had been a failure, and as if Biden had been a success, when I think the evidence suggests the reverse.

SCORING IN—Minimal Motion

SEAN: We’re gonna talk to Jonathan about Kamala when we come back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Jonathan Chait from *New York* magazine and *Intelligencer*. Wherever you land on these legacies, Obama's, Biden's, this conversation that you've, you know, helped kick up into a higher gear, it feels like a healthy one to be having right now, because somewhere in Chicago, Kamala Harris and Tim Walz and their teams are deciding where to take this party. Where do you think they should go?

CHAIT**:** I mean, I wanna argue that it's, it's a fitting topic to discuss right now because Obama really is the closest thing we have for a model for how a politician like Kamala Harris can present herself to the public and how she can govern.

SCORING IN—Pastoral Pluck

CHAIT: Obama understood that he would read as culturally scary or new or different to a lot of Americans. But his way of of handling that was to engage in, you know, what, what some leftist would, would disparages, you know, respectability politics.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins of every race and every hue scattered across three continents. And for as long as I live I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible.*

CHAIT: He was trying to, he was trying to empathize with traditional values. He would always, you know, express patriotism. He would always express the value of hard work. He’d say, ‘I don't want the government to solve all our problems.’ He would, he had this habit that people almost made fun of at the time of, of, every time he explained his position, he would try to articulate what the conservative objection was and to the degree to which he understood it, and had incorporated it into his own thinking.

*<CLIP> OBAMA, 2010: I think one of the proposals that has been focused on by the Republicans as a way to reduce cost is allowing insurance companies to sell across state lines. We actually include this as part of our approach, but the caveat is that we have to do this with some minimum standards.*

CHAIT: And this was effective. This was one of the reasons why he won two overwhelming elections and was able to get so much, so much done. He didn't go around saying, I'm, I'm fundamentally transforming the country. It was his opponents who went around saying he's fundamentally transforming the country, and he's saying, ‘No, I'm just trying to implement some common sense solutions.’ So I think this this question of what is the what is the best model for Democrats is is very alive. So that's one reason why my editors and I decided that this, you know, was was the question that had been, you know, burbling beneath the surface for eight years. And we wanted to bring the whole story to the surface and, and just present the question, right up front.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Do you think we've seen Kamala Harris do anything so far in this – I don't know, month of campaigning or so – that suggests she's going to hew closer to Biden or Obama?

CHAIT: Yeah. I think most of her decisions, just about everything other than picking Walz, really is the kind of decision making that I would like to see from her.

*<CLIP> HARRIS AD: Kamala Harris has spent decades fighting violence crime. As a border state prosecutor she took on drug cartels…*

CHAIT: She's done almost everything right

*<CLIP> HARRIS AD: Fixing the border is tough, so is Kamala Harris.*

CHAIT: She has ditched all the positions that progressives forced her to take in 2020. She's really embraced her identity as a prosecutor, which progressives forced her to abandon.

*<CLIP> KAMALA HARRIS: As a prosecutor I specialized in cases that involved sexual abuse. \*AUDIENCE CHEERS\* Well, Trump was found liable for committing sexual abuse. \*AUDIENCE AGHAST\**

CHAIT: You know I think she's really trying to carefully tailor her, her rhetoric to actually existing public opinion rather than just assume that she can, you know, whip up, progressives to, to turn out by getting all these, you know, left wing voters who haven't been wanting to vote, which I don't think is a realistic model of how to win elections. So, yeah, I think she's making a lot of really, really strong decisions.

SEAN: You said everything BUT picking Tim Walz, who’s got this super liberal reputation from his time as governor in Minnesota. But he also seems really good at *selling* his liberal positions.

*<CLIP> WALZ on CNN: I'm surrounded by states who are spending their time figuring out how to ban Charlotte's Web in their schools while we're banishing hunger from ours with free breakfast and lunch.*

SEAN: Do you think he could help her sell a more liberal agenda or policies? CHAIT: I don't think the vice presidential pick matters a ton. But I think Walz represents a little bit of a, of, the opposing view.

*<CLIP> WALZ: Don’t ever shy away from our progressive values. One person’s socialism is another person’s neighborliness.*

CHAIT: We don't need to actually pay any respects to conservative beliefs. All we need is someone who has a background that we think conservatives can relate to …

*<CLIP> WALZ: My first car, the summer of 1980, been saving up. I buy a 1973 orange Chevy Camaro. It's got an eight track player in it.   
KAMALA HARRIS: Oh, wow.   
WALZ: The previous owner left Bob Seger’s Night Moves in there.*

CHAIT: And then they can, their positions could be as liberal as they want. And the rhetoric can be as liberal as they want.

*<CLIP> TIM WALZ: So today I am directing my state agencies to protect and support the rights of MN’s LGBTQIA+ community. Protecting and supporting access to gender affirming health care is essential to being a welcoming and supportive state …*

CHAIT: They believe there won't be a backlash. I don't I don't think that's really true. And I think if you look at Walz's record as governor, he basically is just, you know, gets everyone who's a Democrat in and is opposed by everyone who's a Republican. I don't think he really expands beyond the Democratic base. Enthusiasm for Walz in some ways is one of the ways in which this, this left wing impulse has been redirected – this idea that you can use character and biography as a substitute for any kind of substantive concessions or even rhetorical concessions to the left, right? When you ask Tim Walz, he doesn't say, like, ‘You know, I understand why some people have concerns about abortion.’ He just says:

*<CLIP> WALZ: Even if we wouldn’t make the same choice for ourselves, there is a golden rule: mind your own damn business!*

SEAN: You know, this piece that you've written, it's about policy. It's about policy accomplishments. It's about policy positions. Does policy matter in this election or is everyone votin’ on vibes?

SCORING IN—Delicate Steps

CHAIT: I think, you know, American politics is very, very polarized. And the vast majority of voters are just for one party or another. But they're so closely balanced that even though there's a diminishing number of persuadable voters, the decisions that those voters make pretty much determine the election. And some of those voters, you know, only go by appearances or how is the economy doing? But there really are some of them who have opinions that are somewhere between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, or maybe they have some issues that line up with one party and other issues that line up with another party. I think people on the left have underestimated the degree to which one element of Trump's success in 2016 was that he abandoned the most unpopular positions of the Republican Party. How did Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney in 2012? By running against the right wing, unpopular Paul Ryan plan to cut taxes for the rich and cut spending on Medicare and Medicaid. And, and Trump instead said, ‘No, I'm not going to cut Medicare. That's stupid. Like, those Republicans who did that are idiots. And I'm not going to touch Medicare and Social Security.’ And he said he would raise taxes on the rich, even though he, he wound up doing the opposite. And of course, when he did the opposite, that was unpopular and contributed to him losing. So I don't think any of this tells us that that policy doesn't matter. I think, you know, taking positions that voters agree with make it easier to win elections.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Jonathan Chait. *Intelligencer* at *New York* magazine. You can subscribe at N Y Mag dot com.

Miles Bryan produced the program today. He was edited by Matthew Collette. We were fact checked by Laura Bullard with help from Amanda Lewellyn. And mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Sean Rameswaram. Noel’s got more for you from the DNC tomorrow on *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]