Friday, Aug. 23, 2024 / How Kamala wins

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

MUSIC IN

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Noel, you were in Chicago all week for the DNC. How did what you saw outside compare to what we all saw inside?   
  
NOEL KING (host): People outside didn’t care.

SEAN: <laughs> Really? But certainly you did find people who were excited?

NOEL: Sure! People were jazzed at this Walz party.

*<CLIP> Ringo, 22: Yes, I'm very excited about the ticket. It is not only world changing, but it is something that is going to move this country forward.*

*<CLIP> VOX POP: “It just feels, like, super authentic, which I think really resonates with folks. Like everyone knows a Tim Walz or something.”*

NOEL: But we also saw people protesting.

*PROTEST TAPE: “Not a blue, not a red, we won’t vote for Gaza’s death.”*   
  
NOEL: And yesterday I brought us people who are mad about Kamala and Joe’s management of the border.

*<CLIP> CADDY: They is getting more benefit than the people who here are hungry and been on the streets all their life. And they came in and the president and the government and the mayor is taking care of them.*

SEAN: But on TODAY, Explained, there’s one last thing we gotta talk about.   
  
NOEL: We gotta talk about the speech.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Rameswaram.

NOEL: Today, Explained. Noel King.

SEAN: Noel King, I was just listening to you on *Yesterday, Explained* and you were saying tonight Kamala Harris will give the biggest speech of her life. How was it?

NOEL: It was not a flashy speech. It was a short speech. It was a fairly to the point speech. It was an introductory speech. It was a bunch of different things all at once. And she pulled it off in 35 minutes. It did feel like the biggest speech of her life. Did you hear nerves?

SEAN: I didn't hear nerves.

NOEL: You didn't hear nerves?

SEAN: I heard like I heard like someone. Who felt like it was her race to lose, and all she had to do was come out and look competent. And that's kind of what she went for.

NOEL: And normal, right?  
  
NOEL: So there was a lot last night in the speech that was about I am a normal, responsible, practical American. I'm like you. She was. There was one moment where she addressed the screen and she said…

*<CLIP> HARRIS: And let me say, I know there are people of various political views watching tonight, and I want you to know I promise to be a President for all Americans*…

NOEL: And I feel like ten years ago that would not have been a big deal. But for the past few years, that's just not a vibe that we get very often in these. I noticed that she didn't say…they a lot to refer to her opponent. She only said like 3 or 4 times. Donald Trump in his convention speech. There were 220 mentions of them. And a lot of it was, you know,

*<CLIP> TRUMP RNC: They’ve taken advantage of us for years, we lose jobs, we lose everything, they gain everything, wipe out our businesses, wipe out our people…*

NOEL: So I thought it read as very normie. And I thought there was another thing she was trying to do last night, which is. Get out in front of and deal with and simultaneously deal with these attacks coming from Donald Trump that will continue to come that she is a communist, that she is a radical, that she is crazy, that she has a bizarre laugh. She was none of those things last night. She didn't appear to be any of those things last night.

SEAN: Another thing Donald Trump did in his. Nomination acceptance speech at the RNC was, of course, covered on the show. Talk about the late, great Hannibal Lecter. Now, I've read some takes this morning, some reflections on Kamala's speech that say, you know, it was ‘the pantsuit was empty,’ I saw there wasn't enough substance. There wasn't enough policy. It was a lot of fluff. Is that even a fair thing to say about a speech? That was very much about, at least, you know, her background and her vision for the country. When the other guy just ranted and talked about a fictional character from a 90s suspense thriller.

NOEL: You know what I was thinking this morning? Because I read that op ed, and I was thinking that these speeches are in the I. These speeches are in the eye of the beholder. If you don't like Kamala Harris, if you don't want her to be president, you are hearing nothingness. You are hearing emptiness. If you don't like Donald Trump, you're hearing a person who sounds really unhinged, right? If you like them, if you're there for them, it doesn't really matter what they say. You're going to find parts of it that you like. I did not think that it was a substance less speech. I think you got to think about what was she there to do last night? And she was there to introduce herself to the American people and tell 300 odd million Americans things about her that we didn't already know. So she gave us her bio. Right? She grew up middle class.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: At the park, my mother would say, “Stay close.” But my father would say, as he smiled, “Run, Kamala, run. Don’t be afraid. Don’t let anything stop you.*

NOEL: She talked a lot about family values. She talks about being raised by a lot of people after her parents got divorced, a thing I had not known about her. So again, she kind of landed that right.

SEAN: Hmm!

NOEL: There was a bit in the speech last night of kind of it takes a village, right? So after her parents divorced, she's raised by many different people in Oakland. She lives in the flats in the city, not up in the mountains. And from there now, from there, she pivots to her career as a prosecutor. And there was a moment in this that I actually thought was genuinely interesting. There's a meme that has haunted Kamala Harris since 2020, and it's the idea that she is a cop and therefore she can't be trusted. 2024 is obviously a very different election cycle, but what she did last night was she, she said when I charged the case, I charged it not in the name of the victim, but in the name of the people.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: for a simple reason. In our system of justice, a harm against any one of us is a harm against all of us.”*

NOEL: And I just thought that was such an interesting moment. She's kind of saying, this is not personal. I have a career in service, and that career in service is for you. Both of them have been critiqued for not telling us a lot about what they plan to do. And at this point in what will probably be, in a lot of ways, a vibes election. Does it matter how SEAN: One thing we didn't hear a lot of all week at the DNC was the war in Gaza probably intentional? I think there were like next to no Muslim-American speakers on stage either, somehow. But Kamala Harris did go there. She did talk about the war, and she did. Sort of lay out her policy in at least that case. What did she say?

NOEL: She struck a balance last night. She started by saying what Hamas did on October 7th was horrific. And then she described the horrific action. Right. She didn't shy away from that.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: At the same time, what has happened in Gaza over the past 10 months is devastating. So many innocent lives lost. Desperate, hungry people fleeing for safety, over and over again. The scale of suffering is heartbreaking.*

NOEL: So I think there was a real effort last night to balance both points of view and to suggest that she'll be a president who understands that she's got to balance multiple points of view. She did talk about it. And I think all week, you know, what I heard in Chicago was speculation. Will she talk about it? How much will she talk about it? She shouldn't talk about it. Right. And I think last night when she talked about it, she was possibly trying to telegraph that not being scared of talking about it means not being scared to deal with it.

SEAN: On the other hand, the Democrats seem like they're chomping at the bit to deal with abortion. They couldn't talk enough about project 2025.

*<CLIP> COREY BOOKER: If Donald Trump has his way he's going to push through his extreme agenda, Project 1825. I'm sorry, I mean Project 1925. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Project 2025.*

SEAN: They even had, like, a failed…I thought, comedic bit about project 2025.

NOEL: You thought it failed? I thought it was cute. The big book.

SEAN: The book was cute. But when Kenan came out to talk about it, I was like, this is getting lost in the sauce a little bit.

*<CLIP> KENAN THOMPSON: You ever seen a document that can kill a small animal and democracy at the same time? Here it is.*

SEAN: But what were the biggest issues that they were leaning into?

NOEL: So we talk about four days of convention. There were and I, I shudder to use this word, but there were a host of issues. But here's what I think. Here's what I think. I think in general, you could file most of those issues under the big umbrella of Freedom

*<CLIP> BEYONCE: Freedom!*

NOEL: this year. Freedom is a word that the Democrats have reappropriated, taking it back from the Republicans and said, “we are the party of freedom,” and they are the party that wants to do strange things to you and make you behave as if it's, you know, 1920 again. So we did hear a lot about abortion. The Democrats brought women up on stage to testify about their abortion experiences.

*<CLIP> WOMAN AT DNC: I was raped by my step father after years of sexual abuse. At age 12 I took my first pregnancy test, it was positive.*

NOEL: And one thing that Kamala Harris really hit hard last night was Donald Trump is very proud of what he did with the Dobbs decision, and he wants to go farther. And that leads us directly into project 2025, right? Because there are lots of things in project 2025 that are pretty strange and unseemly with respect to fertility and tracking women's fertility.

*<CLIP> VP HARRIS: And get this. Get this. He plans to create a national anti-abortion coordinator, and force states to report on women’s miscarriages and abortions. Simply put, they are out of their minds.*

NOEL: But I do think the seizing of the word freedom was big for the Democrats this year. And I think, you know, as an analyst, I think they exploited it pretty well.  
  
SEAN: You know, Noel: you and I are old enough to remember when Kamala Harris was a non-entity. “She polls poorly against Trump!” “She gives terrible interviews!” And now you’ve got Michelle Obama saying …

*<CLIP> MICHELLE OBAMA AT DNC: Something wonderfully magical is in the air, isn’t it? You know, we’re feeling it here in this arena, but it’s spreading across this country we love. A familiar feeling that has been buried too deep for far too long. You know what I’m talking about. It’s the contagious power of hope.*

SEAN: RIP Joe Biden. Looks like no one at the DNC’s got even a hint of buyer’s remorse, here.   
  
NOEL: *Today, Explained* initially was going to go to the convention with the assumption that it would be very boring but an interesting chance to report on the city of Chicago, because there would be these big protests, there would be a lot of disappointment and exhaustion. And that is not at all what happened. What has happened with Kamala Harris over the past couple of weeks? Well, it turns out that she's very telegenic and engaging, that she has a very extroverted presence, that it's nice if you like her again, that it's nice to watch her and that and that enthusiasm creates more enthusiasm. This is all…we talk about all the time, right? Like so much of this is vibes. And the vibes around Kamala are very, very, very good in part because everybody said we have united around her and she's now our messenger, she's now our figurehead. And I think the convention was about reminding people in some ways that Democrats can be very likable.

<SCORING IN> Subtle edge sword

NOEL: And Kamala Harris, although no one predicted it a couple months ago, came out the gate and appears to be that candidate now.

SEAN: Well, King. Have a great weekend.

NOEL: Big fan of the show. Thank you for having me on.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Noel’s gotta go but we got more show for you.

How Kamala takes this whole week celebrating Kamala and turns it into a W when we return on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> KERRY WASHINGTON: So how do you pronounce it?*

*NIECE 1: First you say “comma” like a comma in a sentence.*

*NIECE 2: Then you say la like ‘lalalalala’*

*KERRY WASHINGTON: put it together and it’s 1, 2,3*

*TOGETHER: KAMALA*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with a political strategist named Mike Podhorzer.

MIKE PODHORZER (political commentator): Former political director of the AFL, CIO. Senior fellow at CAP now, and I publish Weekend Reading, Substack.

SEAN: Mike was in Chicago this week, just like all the other political writers. But while everyone was writing about vibes and speeches, he was writing about polls.

MIKE: Because I think that the horse race polling, to be clear, undermines the idea of democratic elections.

SEAN: Okay.

MIKE: It positions all of us as spectators. It puts us in a sense of is our team winning or losing?

SEAN: mmh.

MIKE: And we are not spectators. We are the owners. Right? What matters, um, the day after the election is not whether or how early we knew what the outcome was going to be, but whether we knew what the consequences of that outcome would be when we cast our ballots. And in November 2016, we knew that the six states that matter today were going to matter and determine our political direction, until the Trump dynamic ended. If you obsess on the daily, you know, noise from the polling. You miss that, we are in this trench warfare and it hasn't changed, right, that there are these six states. They have only been decided by narrow margins. Margins too small for any survey to get right.

SEAN: You're saying you know. We don't want to over focus on polls. What really matters is these six states Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Nevada, Arizona I assume are the six.

MIKE: Right.

SEAN: What should they be doing in those six states?

MIKE: Two things have to happen. The first thing is voters understand how dangerous it would be to the things they value most if Trump is elected and you get Project 2025-like agenda, right?

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: ​​It's all laid out in project 2025 written by his closest advisors and its sum total is to pull our country back to the past. But America, we are not going back, not going back.*

MIKE: The second thing they have to do is assure people that Kamala Harris will be a good president, someone that they will feel good about waking up, knowing that she's the person who will ultimately deal with the emergencies and the important things that are going to happen in this country. And one, and I think that Harris, to her credit, did something that the Democrats have had a hard time doing or even recognizing the importance of until this point. Which is when she said that is the most important election in our lives, that Donald Trump was an unserious person.

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS:…but the consequences of putting Donald Trump back in the White House are extremely serious.*

MIKE: And when you look at other countries in the world that have managed to defeat people like Donald Trump in elections…

*<CLIP> BBC: In a shock result for all and a huge relief for many here, the left, the far left coalition has unexpectedly become the biggest party in the French Parliament, beating the far right.*

MIKE: …It is really making clear that the only power he has is any we give him. That he himself is not scary, but right…that he's just kind of a clown or “weird” as they say, right? But that if you put that person in office. The power you're giving him will do a great deal of harm to you.

SEAN: Mhm.

MIKE: And that is like the sweet spot for defeating that kind of autocratic wannabe.

SEAN: And you think that message plays in these six pertinent states?

MIKE: Absolutely.

SCORING IN <Bouncing along>

MIKE: I mean, you loo… what we saw in the midterms two years ago, was literally unprecedented in, like, our election history. Where the governors of Michigan, Wisconsin, the states that are most important for this election, right? Those governors won by more in an election where their president was the party than they had won by four years ago in the blue wave election.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: The people of Wisconsin came out and said, who do we want to govern this state? And by two points, the people of Wisconsin said we would like the Democrat to govern our state…*

MIKE: Because that dynamic was at play, that their opponents were MAGA acolytes who are not seen as serious, and they have demonstrated themselves as being consistent with what people wanted in their governors. Right. That's the race that needs to be run in those states. We saw it happen two years ago. That's what she seems headed towards doing. And if that's replicated, I think that's going to be the result.

SCORING OUT

MIKE: But the other part of what has to happen, and I don't want this bill to not be underscored enough, is that you have one set of voters who vote every election, no matter what. Just every other November, they're going to be…they’re voting, right? And for them, the discussion we've been having really captures what they need to hear. You say you're going to vote for Harris or Trump, but then there's an even larger number of Americans who have voted but don't vote in every election. And for them, the question is what is going to get them, I hate to say it, but off the couch this time? And we know that what mobilizes those kinds of voters is loss aversion, the sense that if they don't go out and vote, they have something to lose.

SEAN: You're saying you're saying these voters aren't motivated by civic duty…

MIKE: <laughs>

SEAN: ... but instead maybe. Now they have a, you know, like a paycheck with less buying power.

MIKE: Not only do I think they're not motivated by civic duty, but I think the reason one of the big contributors to why politics is the way it is, is because there is such a substantial portion of American voters who are alienated from the whole thing. Because people read that and I should even more specifically, and people, especially younger people, millennials and Gen Z, really feel like this is a difficult country to get ahead in. And they're right. And the job market since 2008 for most younger people is completely different than it was before. It's much harder. It's much more precarious. An enormous number of them got fired during Covid, right? Their experience was, yes, they may have gotten a check, but it certainly gave them a sense that the rug could be pulled out from under them. And other than a check, no one really cared. That..and in a country where what you do for work is really wrapped up in your identity, they're saying you're not needed. That's why I'm saying it's not civic duty, it's loss aversion. These are generations of people who have not experienced politicians doing something that's helped their lives, but they sure feel like they've experienced politicians hurting their lives.

SEAN: Can I ask you, Mike? Do people, do people ask you a lot? Who do you think is going to win the election?

MIKE: Yeah, of course.

SEAN: <laughs>

MIKE: And that's why polling is so, you know, so like crack, right? It's like from the Oracle of Delphi… When we're nervous we all want to know how it's all going to come out. Right. But when you, when you think there's a way you can come out, you forget that it will come out the way that you put your effort into.

SEAN: Ah-ha!

MIKE: Right? Right. That and one of the expressions I use is like, stop thinking about these elections, whether they're within the margin of error or not. We know they're all within the margin of our effort, right? In 2016, in Wisconsin, Trump won by 20,000 votes in 2020. 2016. In 2020, Biden won by 20,000 votes. Right? No survey, even the day before, is going to tell you who was going to win. But I can tell you today that who wins depends on how much both sides put into the race.

<SCORING IN> Rabbit hole

SEAN: Mike Podhorzer. His substack is called Weekend Reading. You can read it on the weekend or even on a weekday at Weekend Reading dot net. Our show was produced by Miles Bryan and Haleema Shah. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi. Fact checked by Laura Bullard and Matthew Collette. And mixed by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

The rest of the party includes Patrick Boyd, Hady Mawajdeh, Amanda Lewellyn, Avishay Artsy, Victoria Chamberlin, Peter Balonon-Rosen, and our EP, Miranda Kennedy. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder and so can you.

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SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]