

# [***After rocky start, Kamala Harris emerges as the Biden campaign's lead prosecutor on top issues***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BVH-30M1-JBSS-S004-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Kamala Harris*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/harris-arizona-abortion/index.html) hadn't even started building up to her ending when the crowd in Las Vegas - more fired up than any poll would suggest - started chanting, "Four more years!" But she made sure everyone heard the line she's come up with: "Trump abortion bans."

And not one pro-Palestinian protester interrupted her that day, or, for that matter, over her four-day campaign swing West.

The vice president is clearly feeling energized these days. She is more engaged. She is looser. Aides say she was the one who pushed to explicitly call out former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) as responsible for every rollback in abortion rights, and she is clearly feeding on the old prosecutorial rush of tearing apart the opposition's argument.

In a conference room in the back of a campaign office in a Las Vegas strip mall, Harris said she is finding the last few months, on the attack and able to zero in on the contrast with Trump, "very liberating."

"You can't forget that for the first probably year and a half, we were landlocked. It was basically me and Joe and a Zoom screen," she told CNN, in an exclusive interview at the end of the multiday campaign swing, built in part around getting her to battlegrounds [*Arizona*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/harris-arizona-abortion/index.html) and Nevada, and around what staff has found to be helpful downtime back home in Los Angeles cooking Sunday dinner. "Being out and being able to just have real conversations and not soundbites in an interview - it is liberating."

No one in the vice president's orbit, including Harris herself, needs to be reminded how the disappointment and disenchantment from [*her first years on the job*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/02/politics/kamala-harris-office-dynamics/index.html) still hang over her, or how odd it is that some voters say in interviews with CNN and outside focus groups they are inclined toward Biden but are turned off by Harris.

CNN's conversations with two dozen aides to the vice president, the reelection campaign and other top Democrats also show the paradox that even the most Biden-centric aides have been forced to grudgingly admit: There is another swath of voters turned off by the president - and their internal data shows Harris will be critical to getting them if Biden wants to win a second term.

After years of being shunted to politically toxic and fruitless parts of the administration portfolio, such as [*overseeing migration negotiations*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/06/politics/kamala-harris-migration/index.html) with Central American leaders, or clearly junior varsity ones like chairing the National Space Council, these days are so full of plum assignments for Harris that her trip to Arizona was originally supposed to be to promote the latest round of student loan debt cancellation - only to get quickly changed when the state Supreme Court ruled that [*Arizona must adhere to its 1864 abortion ban*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/08/us/arizona-supreme-court-abortion-access-tuesday/index.html).

"She has been front and center on so many of the most politically potent issues right now," said Julie Chavez Rodriguez, who was a top aide to Harris for years before becoming the Biden reelection campaign manager, calling these "new opportunities to speak to the coalitions we know she already has a deep affinity to, but on issues that are top of mind for those voters."

"As a former prosecutor, she can prosecute the case on so much," Rodriguez said.

It means getting to talk about gun control and reaching out to younger voters like the gym full of high schoolers in Vegas who cheered even more loudly for her than they did when Marvel actress Xochitl Gomez took the stage first. ("She's killing it!" an excited 15-year-old in a Barbie-pink denim jacket exclaimed after pushing up to take a photo with Harris as Aretha Franklin's "Respect" played on the speakers.)

While Biden talks about [*threats to democracy*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/politics/biden-democracy-trump-2024-speech/index.html), Harris talks about "freedom" under assault - a way of thinking that she said feels rooted in her life and in the lives of the voters she is after. It's the stories she used to tell about being taken to civil rights protests when she was in her stroller. It's showing up at the Cow Palace in San Francisco when she was district attorney to join the chants to close the "gun show loophole" - as Biden did earlier this month in a new action to crack down on buyers at gun shows avoiding background checks.

"I grew up the child of parents who fought for civil rights and freedoms," she said, "so this really does cut at the core for me around what's important about our country and what's at stake in the country."

More often these days, she's invoking the "prosecutor for president" framing that defined her own presidential campaign more than four years ago. She likes facts, she says. She likes using them to show she is right and has been right all along about what she says Trump is after.

"The prosecutor approach is really about just deconstructing an issue," she said. "It's presenting and reminding folks about the empirical evidence that shows us exactly how we arrived at this point. ... He can't hide from this stuff."

Just before coming on stage in Arizona, Harris and a few aides scrambled to add in a line to go right at what Trump had said minutes before - that the US Supreme Court's Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade is "working the way it is supposed to."

"Here's what a second Trump term looks like: More bans, more suffering and less freedom," she told those gathered in Tucson, warning a national abortion ban and restrictions on abortion medications loom.

"Shame! Shame! Shame!" the crowd started chanting.

By that evening, at a $1.5 million fundraiser in "Family Guy" creator Seth MacFarlane's tree-filled living room in a Beverly Hills house with a 360-degree view of Los Angeles, and then in front of a luncheon for Black women in power the next day, she had started building that into a pursed lip, lowered voice Trump impression of her own, mocking the former president as saying, "Well, you know, the states will do what they want to do."

During her own run for president, Harris was often derided as having no core and just chasing situational ***politics***. By the end of the swing through Nevada, she was the one coming at Trump for being a weathervane on even the most fundamental issues of belief and ***politics***.

"It's not as though he has any real explanation. There's a lot of what he's doing that is just to suggest that he took a different tact," she said of Trump's shifting arguments about whether and when to have abortion bans. "There's a lot of benefit to being unburdened by ideology."

A clearer mission

Harris' small staff has struggled since her inauguration to keep up with a scrutiny no previous vice president has faced, so even with the significantly stepped-up travel schedule these days, they have been grateful for help from new campaign hires in fielding press requests or just handling event logistics.

For the candidate herself, the shift has been more existential.

Biden's personality fit the unstructured ambiguity of the modern vice presidency. He could be the presidential adviser, or the chummy cheerleader schmoozing hours after the conversations were scheduled to end.

Not Harris. She likes a plan. She thrives with a goal. Left to her own, people who know her and were sometimes involved say she often let a small circle of friends and advisers into her head, getting into agonizing spirals of what else she should be doing, but also why she wasn't doing more, but also what would happen if she did try to do more.

Three years of telling Harris she was supposed to establish herself led to more stress over what that could mean more than any actual progress.

"It took me way longer than two years how to figure out how to be a good United States senator, and her job is a lot harder than mine," said Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a longtime leader on the gun safety movement who has often talked about how engaged he has found Harris to be. "There's no doubt she's better at the job today than she was in Year 1."

Running for vice president has the definition that being vice president lacks. It's tactics, strategy, a target, a goal. Given a mission, aides have found Harris to be an extremely effective performance player, whether pressuring interest group leaders dragging their feet to support Biden or helping deliver the battlegrounds where she is shining more.

"What business do we need to accomplish?" is a line Harris tends to use and that staff have learned to use themselves to prod her.

With Harris hyperaware of the filters she believes go over her every word and move, aides know better than to use the phrase "attack dog" in a planning meeting with her. She won't risk being seen as an angry Black woman. She won't be the traditional running mate all-purpose battering ram.

At her first event in Las Vegas last week, Harris asked students to raise their hands if they were ever in an active shooter drill; dozens of hands went up. She told them about the blood stains on the floor and abandoned valentines still strewn around the preserved Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School she toured in Parkland, Florida, last month, and about a student from another school who confided that she didn't like going to fifth period because there was no closet in that room to hide in.

Harris has a way of telling stories like these that spark audible reactions of shock and outrage from the crowd. She did it there, and again an hour later while talking about abortion, decrying how having no exception for rape is "immoral," resulting in a survivor of "violence to their body - that they don't have the right to determine what happens to their body next."

"There's a certain level of authority that comes with having a uterus and being a woman," said New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, praising how Harris has been leading the charge for the administration on reproductive rights.

"They have the potential to tell a really interesting story and vision that connects with younger people, but there's a long way to go from here to there," said John Della Volpe, a pollster who specializes in younger voters and is not affiliated with the reelection campaign. "She can translate that in a more emotional and evocative way that resonates with young people."

For Harris, it's at least the feeling, for the first time in a long time, of standing up and standing out on her own. These days, Trump campaign aides don't talk much about her, despite past Republicans' attempts to make her a liability for Biden. But she's eager to take on whoever Trump picks as his own running mate.

"I am ready," she threw down, "for whoever has the, fill in the blank, to do it."

Biden rivalries still bubble

For all the efforts, the campaign and Harris' own staff still aren't quite sure what people make of her. In the last few months, they invested in asking voters about her, including having the Democratic National Committee pay for focus groups in Milwaukee run by an operative who has long worked for her.

The bad news: Several people said Harris rubs them the wrong way, in all the ways that are familiar from criticism of her. A few specifically cited her laugh - a frequent target of Republican operatives who flood clips of it on social media, which defenders say plays into sexism.

The good news, as described to CNN by several people familiar with the findings: People said they would much rather hear from Harris than Biden on abortion, guns, student loans and Gaza.

Multiple people asked said they didn't think Harris had been treated well. They questioned whether Biden actually likes her.

Harris has internalized skepticism about campaign data - "I give polls only so much credit," she said in the interview - but around her, the responses were validation of years of grumbling that Biden should have been better setting up his heir apparent, and that perhaps they are now both in danger of paying the price.

Yet the rivalry still bubbles up. Some Biden aides greeted the findings with frustration, annoyed by the suggestion that the president will need to lean on her more. Questions about where Harris is more resonant immediately lead Biden aides to stress that they are complementary components of the campaign, and that the president, not her, is the one who can do things like go to Pittsburgh [*to propose new tariffs*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/politics/biden-tariffs-chinese-steel-economic-pitch/index.html) on Chinese steel.

Harris has integrated so much into the work of the administration that Air Force Two sat on the tarmac for an hour recently, delaying a campaign-geared trip to North Carolina as she listened in on Biden's call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which she has done without public announcement throughout the Israel-Hamas war.

But in a March speech in Alabama, Harris called for "an immediate ceasefire," waited for applause, and only then added, "for at least the next six weeks" to get the Israeli hostages out of Gaza. West Wing aides fumed both at the noticeable pause - even though the position was the same as Biden's - and at hearing that Harris' aides had alerted reporters ahead of time that they should watch the speech.

Likewise, [*when CNN reported in February*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/18/politics/kamala-harris-biden-reelection-effort/index.html) that Harris had been holding private meetings with top Democratic officials to discuss campaign strategy, top Biden aides spread word to several who attended that they had not realized these were happening.

"There's so many ways in which they are able to complement one another and speak to our core audiences from different perspectives that reinforce who we are as a campaign and as an administration at this unique moment in time," said Rodriguez, the Biden campaign manager.

The solution for Harris, aides believe, is exposure. Though many leading Democrats think she'd have a hard path to a future presidential nomination, aides believe they can at least boost her numbers by getting her out more.

But the day job still gets in the way. A long-anticipated appearance on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show was postponed last week, according to people familiar, rather than risking a setback to being taken seriously by laughing it up on a comedy show in the midst of a crisis.

With under 200 days until the election, they are not sure when she will get back.

She's already scripted some bits, though.

When MacFarlane asked her at the fundraiser who her favorite Trump is, she knew the question was coming. No purposeful pause this time.

"Alec Baldwin," she shot back.

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