

# [***Inside Kamala Harris' quiet effort to break through the Biden campaign's information bubble***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BC2-XD71-DY7V-G001-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Washington, DC (CNN) &#8212; For some, it's been a conversation off to the side at the White House congressional holiday party. Others have gathered at actress Eva Longoria's house in Los Angeles. Still more have huddled on Air Force Two or gathered for a series of Saturday sessions and dinners that Vice President [*Kamala Harris*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/politics/kamala-harris-trump-nato/index.html) has been hosting at the Naval Observatory.

More than two dozen sources tell CNN that Harris has been gathering information to help her penetrate what she sometimes refers to as the "bubble" of Biden campaign thinking, telling people she's aiming to use that intelligence to push for changes in strategy and tactics that she hopes will put the ticket in better shape to win.

Multiple leading Democrats, anxious about a campaign they fear might be stumbling past a point of no return, say their conversations with Harris have been a surprising and welcome change, after months of feeling sloughed off by the White House and Biden campaign headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware.

"The 'bedwetting' complaints are running thin with people," said a person who attended one of the meetings, describing the general state of anxiety circulating in top Democratic circles. "The West Wing and the campaign need to be better."

Harris did a good job fielding those responses, the person added, "and deserves credit for it."

Many of those people also say that the conversations have shifted their opinions of the vice president, seeing her now as a more integral and complementary part of the reelection effort.

Harris's stepped-up efforts come at a critical moment. Her office has largely stabilized after early years of intense dysfunction, and she has been slowly asserting herself more confidently in public, [*including in her speech Friday at the Munich Security Conference*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/politics/kamala-harris-trump-nato/index.html) that was aimed at reassuring Europeans alarmed about a potential [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) return to the White House. But [*Republican forces*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/06/politics/2024-republicans-kamala-harris/index.html) have been [*capitalizing on her low approval numbers*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/kamala-harris-joe-biden-gaza-israel-arab-americans/index.html) and [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden)'s advanced age by making the 2024 campaign more about Harris and the chance she could become president, especially as [*questions about the president's mental acuity*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/biden-age-concerns-analysis/index.html) continue to define his own candidacy.

[*There are even Democrats who still gripe*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/12/politics/kamala-harris-democratic-party/index.html) that the best thing Biden could do for his chances would be to engage in the fantasy of dumping his vice president from the ticket.

Harris doesn't engage in any of that. Nor does she let slide any swipes at the president or suggestions that he's having trouble getting support. She's not scheming or going behind the campaign's back - almost always, at least one campaign aide has been in the room for her discussions.

But that doesn't mean she is not concerned about the state of the reelection effort, frequently saying in [*public that she and the president must earn a second term*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/19/politics/kamala-harris-biden-2024-reelection/index.html). She often says in one-on-one conversations and smaller group gatherings, described to CNN by two dozen people, that she doesn't worry Biden will lose to Trump - but she does worry about losing "to the couch."

Harris tends to end the often strung-out conversations with a reassuring "By the way, we're gonna win." But each gathering has led to her asking staff to put together more meetings, often interspersed with more calls and demands for follow-up as she digs deeper into what many feel has been going wrong. She calls these "do outs."

"Folks like seeing the vice president not just playing the role of cheerleader and promoter of the ticket but having deep conversations about how we message and how we win," said Levar Stoney, the mayor of Richmond, Virginia, who attended a meeting of several dozen Black men in ***politics*** and finance last month at the Naval Observatory.

Getting harsh messages

Harris has been hearing some harsh responses.

Rep. Debbie Dingell has pushed her repeatedly to get the White House to take more seriously how hard Biden's response to the Gaza war is hitting Arab Americans in her home state of Michigan. Steve Horsford, the Nevada congressman and Congressional Black Caucus chair, urged Harris to get the administration to talk more about housing affordability rather than the triumphant and often-disconnected talk about "Bidenomics."

At a session around Harris' dining table last Saturday [*with six Democratic governors and their chiefs of staff,*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/politics/harris-set-to-host-democratic-governors-this-weekend-to-discuss-2024-campaign/index.html) according to multiple people who were there or were told soon after, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer slammed the way the president and the campaign have been talking about abortion rights. Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker hammered Biden's response to the migrant crisis and insisted that they need to quickly get much more aggressive about attacking Republicans and Trump for tanking the bipartisan immigration bill. Maryland Gov. Wes Moore complained that the campaign has been failing to get through to voters under 35 years old.

At the governors' meeting especially, tensions were high coming in, with many cranky about scrambling ona Saturday to fly to Washington for what they expected to be a perfunctory pep session. In a room stocked with potential 2024 replacement candidates and expected 2028 challengers to Harris for the Democratic nomination, they all took moments at both the middle and the end to reaffirm that they were behind Biden as the nominee but also that he absolutely had to win.

Most in the room had dealt with Trump during their own first terms. Most had beaten Trump-inspired Republicans in their 2022 races. What they are seeing in Biden's campaign, they told Harris, does not look like the path to victory, and they were eager to see changes.

"OK," said Harris after listening to an hour of deconstruction. "What do you think should be done?"

Pressing campaign leadership

Most of the Harris sessions have been structured as listening opportunities for her - but not the one a few Saturdays ago, when she summoned top campaign staff to join her at the Naval Observatory.

She has been to several briefings with Biden and top strategists and has heard the larger conversations about the themes of the campaign, and what she wasn't interested in, Harris told people ahead of time, was another slide presentation.

Over several hours, she pushed for concrete, specific answers about polling and other data coming in. What more did they need to know and when would they know it? Where should she go? What should she tweak? Who isn't the campaign reaching? How can they start to?

She has had similar conversations with top fundraising officials on the reelection effort, asking - as she has done in the past about her own campaigns - about benchmarks and comparisons with previous campaigns.

Aides have walked away feeling like they've gotten new information from what she shared with them from other conversations and appreciative of the interest in moving elements of a campaign that have often been slow and bottle-necked.

"She is a principal who takes an operative's level of interest in the details," said one Democrat close to the campaign.

This is a more assertive role for a running mate than has traditionally been the case, and one that risks banging into an often insular and guarded Biden inner circle, which likes to point out that the 2020 and 2022 elections went better for him than almost any outsider would have predicted. On top of that, some around Biden still nurse their own grudges against Harris for the way she came after him in the Democratic primaries years ago, or for the number of problems she caused for the administration with her fumbles over her first few years on the job.

So far, Harris's input has been facilitated by Julie Chavez Rodriguez, the Biden campaign manager who originally entered the the president's orbit asan aide to Harrisand who listens to the vice president in a way that is rarely the case between a campaign manager and running mate. Sergio Gonzales, another Harris aide who joined the campaign as a counselor specifically for her, has an office directly across from Rodriguez, and both were at the Naval Observatory strategy meeting and have been seen as looking out for Harris throughout.

But major changes loom for the Biden campaign, including Jen O'Malley Dillon, the 2020 campaign manager, transitioning from a White House job to helping shake up the reelection campaign structure. Several Harris confidants have in the past told CNN they have been wary of O'Malley Dillon's approach to the vice president.

"Vice President Harris knows the stakes of this election and is putting in the work to earn - not ask - for the support of the voters who have the most on the line in this election," Chavez Rodriguez told CNN.

A focus on Black men

One of the biggest topics of conversation in Harris' sessions with campaign staff: How [*to energize Black voters*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/kamala-harris-black-voters-joe-biden/index.html) and tighten economic messaging that will appeal to them.

That came directly from Harris's two biggest private campaign sessions so far.

The first Naval Observatory dinner in December brought together Black men in entertainment and media, including comedian D.L. Hughley, film director Spike Lee, rapper Fat Joe, actor Don Cheadle and broadcaster Roland Martin.

The second in January focused on Black men in finance and ***politics***. EPA Administrator Michael Regan and White House public engagement director Steve Benjamin were there, but so were outside voices such as Cliff Albright, the executive director of the Black Lives Matter fund, Recording Academy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. and a collection of young Black mayors.

Both meetings built on a session she did last year with about 30 young Black men aged 18-35 at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building near the White House and on ongoing frustration from supporters that the Democratic Party needs to be spending as much time specifically reaching out to Black men as to Black women.

The discussions often got intense around the small-group tables set up in the Observatory that Harris rotated around. Biden keeps talking about macroeconomics and stability, some complained, but what they're hearing from their communities are complaints about checks not going as far as they used to. Acronyms like "ARPA" and "IRA" are going over people's heads, they said, and the president and the campaign need to do a better job of distilling the impact on people's lives.

"I fully get that," Harris said.

They talked about the way the situation in Gaza is hitting Black communities who feel connected to the sense of another marginalized community under attack. They talked about criminal justice reform. Not matching the Republicans for aggressiveness and Trump's success in dominating the news makes Democrats overlooked at best, and often just weak - and that itself is driving some Black men to Trump, they said.

"Vice President Harris is playing an incredibly meaningful role with respect to the Biden reelection campaign," said House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, who attended the second session. "Convening stakeholders from the African American community is a very important part of that equation."

As with almost every one of these meetings, many attendees say that, as good as it was to be heard, they are waiting to see what kind of follow-through will come.

"It definitely could be helpful," another person who attended told CNN. "If that was it, then it won't be."

Tweaking mechanics for bigger changes ahead

Some of the conversations have gotten more micro than that.

When staff told Harris ahead of a trip to South Carolina - which was scheduled for the day before the new official first-in-the-nation Democratic primary - that political operatives on the ground there had mentioned that an automated outreach "robo-call" was a week behind schedule, the vice president pushed them to get that fixed.

When she arrived, she made a point of stopping South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn between meetings to tell him that the issue had had been resolved.

Sometimes it's as simple as her telling California legislators on a trip back to Sacramento that they need to start now in helping Democrats organize in the neighboring swing states of Arizona and Nevada. Or asking the governors at the end of their meeting to follow up with staff with lists of social media personalities and influencers in their states who have big followings, so that she can work on doing short interviews or other content when she comes to campaign.

"You know the influencers in your state. You know them better than us," she told them.

She has also relayed some of the feedback internally on the government side, as Biden prepares for the State of the Union and other policy rollouts in the months ahead.

"She's a very gifted, smart, capable strategist who knows how to win," said Horsford, the Nevada congressman. "I just hope the campaign listens to all the people who are giving them good advice."

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