

## **Democrats Deserved a Contest, Not a Coronation**

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### **Body**

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The last two times Democrats attempted to stage a coronation instead of a contest in choosing a presidential nominee, it did not go well. Not for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Not for Joe Biden this year.

So why would anyone think it's a good idea when it comes to Kamala Harris -- the all but anointed nominee after barely a day?

Maybe the answer is that a competitive process, either before or during the Democratic convention, would have been divisive and bruising. Or that Harris's fund-raising advantages over any potential rival were already insuperable. Or that Democratic Party big shots (though not Barack Obama, at least not publicly yet) genuinely think the vice president is the best candidate to beat the former president.

But the one thing the Democratic Party is not supposed to be is anti-democratic -- a party in which insiders select the nominee from the top down, not the bottom up, and which expects the rank and file to fall in line and clap enthusiastically. That's the playbook of ruling parties in autocratic states.

It's also a recipe for failure. The whole point of a competitive process, even a truncated one, is to discover unsuspected strengths, which is how Obama was able to best Clinton in 2008, and to test for hidden weakness, which is how Harris flamed out as a candidate the last time, before even reaching the Iowa caucus. If there's evidence that she's a better candidate now than she was then, she should be given the chance to prove it.

Or perhaps that's what party leaders fear. They seem as determined to ignore Harris's manifest weaknesses as they were to ignore Biden's -- right up until the fiasco of last month's debate. Weaknesses such as:

**She's unpopular:** As of July 22, only 38.3 percent of Americans approve of Harris, as against 51.4 percent who don't, according to 538. She has not had a positive approval rate since September 2021. Why would Democrats rush to nominate a candidate who's been so consistently underwater with the electorate?

**She's been a bad campaigner:** In her only truly competitive election victory, for California attorney general in 2010, she beat her Republican opponent by less than a percentage point while Democrats won the other major statewide races by 10 points or more. In her race for the 2020 presidential nomination, she effectively appointed her sister, Maya, to run her campaign. A 2019 Politico story summed up the dysfunction: "Aides describe a bleak environment in which workers have started to openly question the judgment of managers after seeing colleagues marched out the door."

**She's been a bad manager:** "The quartet of soon-to-be-empty desks reignited questions about why Harris churns through top-level Democratic staff, an issue that has colored her nearly 18 years in public service," The Washington Post reported in December 2021, following a series of high-level staff exits. "Staffers who worked for Harris before she was vice president said one consistent problem was that Harris would refuse to wade into briefing materials prepared by staff members, then berate employees when she appeared unprepared."

**She has a penchant for excruciating banality:** "It is time for us to do what we have been doing," she told NBC's Craig Melvin. "And that time is every day." These and her many other Jack Handey-style Deep Thoughts are being weaponized by the Trump campaign in social media memes. They cut deep because they underscore a widespread perception, quietly shared by many Democrats, that Harris is a lightweight.

**She's a blue-state Democrat who needs to win purple states:** Some progressives may have once disliked Harris for the tough-on-crime reputation she gained as San Francisco's district attorney. But to the parts of the country that will decide this election, she's a Bay Area liberal whose convictions come from the same D.E.I. playbook -- she narrated a video making the case for equity over equality -- that has become anathema to so many Americans.

**She's anchored to Joe Biden's record:** Too many liberals seem to think that Biden has had a terrific presidency, hobbled only by his personal frailties. Consistent majorities of Americans beg to differ. An ABC poll this month found that 42 percent of Americans thought their financial situation under Biden was worse; only 17 percent felt it was better. Illegal immigration is another loser for the administration -- underscored, not refuted, by

the fact that an executive order by the president last month stemmed the tide of border crossings. If the fix was that easy, why didn't Harris champion it three years ago?

Her career smacks of connections and favoritism: How did a person who failed her first bar exam when more than 72 percent of her cohort reportedly passed, but cultivated powerful friends, become a D.A. and an A.G.? When Biden came under extreme pressure to narrow his vice-presidential search to Black women, did merit become secondary to race? Progressives may hate these questions or dismiss them as Fox News talking points. But voters in the swing states that will decide November's election will be asking them all the same.

"Decide in haste, repent at leisure" is an old expression. In the Democrats' hurry to crown Harris, it's also, sadly, an apt one.

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## Graphic

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