

Opinion **Kamala Harris**

How Kamala Harris might still lose

Polling precedent and economic data suggest the Democrats shouldn't get ahead of themselves

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Tim Walz and Kamala Harris at a campaign event in Las Vegas, Nevada, at the weekend © Kevin Mohatt/Reuters

Janan Ganesh 14 HOURS AGO

A month has passed since the near-assassination of the 45th and, who knows, 47th US president. When did you last think or talk about it? When did you last see the photo of Donald Trump's raised and defiant hand, which promised at the time to be one of those icons that cross so deep into mass culture that a Warholian silkscreen might be made of it?

I don't mean to suggest that the world's most famous outpatient has been somehow short-changed for his brush with death. The point is rather this: the transience and tenuousness of almost all political moments. Few excitements outlast the next batch of news stories. It is a warning the Democrats should hold on to in what is becoming, for them, a glorious but perhaps over-celebrated summer.

How might their moment in the sun go wrong? First, consider the polls. In August 2016, Hillary Clinton led Trump by a [much larger margin](#) than Kamala Harris does now. Because the vice-president is doing so well relative to Joe Biden, some liberals are behaving as though her absolute position is commanding. It isn't. A lead of one or two points in [national polls-of-polls](#), a tad more in some Midwestern states, a deficit in the south-west: none of this warrants either Democratic giddiness or Republican moping. (In fact, an underrated threat to Trump is that his air of cantankerous dejection becomes off-putting and therefore self-fulfilling.) On the face of it, Trump is

in a better position than he was in not just eight summers ago, but even four. In 2020, polls at this stage pointed to a popular-vote defeat of around [eight points](#). He lost by half that.

If the Democrats surge ahead after their upcoming convention in Chicago, this warning will age badly. But there is one reason, namely the deteriorating economic news, to believe things will then go the other way.

Americans were pessimistic enough about the economy as it was. Trying to square this with GDP growth that is the envy of the high-income world, some liberals have resorted to a theory of partisan bias: that is, Republican voters, consciously or not, are hamming up their struggles with inflation. It is important to put this hokum to bed. Ill-feeling about the economy is quite staggering in its societal breadth. A consistent [70 per cent or so](#) of respondents are negative about “economic conditions” in the FT-Michigan Ross survey, which tallies with a similar [Gallup](#) question. There just aren’t enough Republicans in America to sustain numbers of such comprehensive badness.

No, the anger is real. (Because inflation is real.) And this is *before* the economic slowdown that now seems to be in train. There isn’t enough time for the rising jobless numbers to reach disturbing levels before November 5. But an incumbent party’s ideal campaign line — don’t entrust your prosperity to the opposition — is less and less of an option.

Harris slightly edges Trump on economic trust, but even this seems to hinge on her breaking with her own administration. Some 60 per cent of voters want the vice-president to [dump or revise](#) Bidenomics. If she does, she risks internal dissent, as Democrats rather like the statism. If she doesn’t, she risks regressing to his low standing among voters. Like her line on criminal justice and the Israeli-Palestinian question, the dilemma can be fudged in these vacation months, when voters are half-watching at best. But not indefinitely.

It is worth dwelling on that seasonal element of politics. The “weird” line of attack on the Republican right; the twee paeans to Tim Walz as the white-haired incarnation of Minnesota Nice: all of this is clever and effective, not to mention true. But it also reeks of, well, August. When politics resumes in earnest in the autumn, the fundamentals of this race should come through.

And these are? Presidential elections in the modern US are close. While Trump has never been popular outside his fans, their geographic distribution allows him to win with around 47 per cent of the national vote. Republicans, though out of touch on reproductive rights, can frame Harris-Walz, without too much of a stretch, as the

reproductive rights, can name names, and, without too much of a stretch, as the most progressive Democratic ticket since 1988. Above all, after almost a decade of chasing or holding the White House, Trump's oddities are priced-in. Harris remains ill-defined and only half-tested.

For a sense of the evanescence of politics, remember that Biden's State of the Union address was hailed for showing the vigour of a prime-age man. That was March. As she contemplates the light speed with which things are liable to change, his successor should take heart, but also fright.

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