

Why Trump is lost and flailing

Waleed Aly



The fact Harris isn't well known works in her favour – she seems like change, which has thrown the former president.

Outside this week's Democratic National Convention, beyond the lights and delirium, the Chicago venue was emblazoned with a curious sign: "A New Way Forward" it boomed, echoing a pledge Kamala Harris has taken to offering on the trail. "Together we will chart a new way forward," is how she put it at a Milwaukee rally during the Convention.

By the time Barack Obama took to the stage and inspired the crowd to chant "yes she can!" you could have been forgiven for reviving all the hits in your own mind. Kamala Harris: change you can believe in. It kind of fits the fervour.

But new? We should recall, because it's easy to forget in these heady days, that Harris is, in fact, the vice president of the current administration. This is not Obama 2008, which was so clearly a response to eight years of George W. Bush. It's not even Biden 2020, which sought to terminate Trumpism after a term and render it an aberration. It's a VP seeking a promotion. And yet, we have one senior adviser telling *The New York Times* that Harris "is absolutely the change candidate".

I must confess I didn't see this coming. I take my place among the countless political observers who felt Harris posed no particular threat to Trump: that she would never have won the Democratic nomination in a normal primary contest, and

that a Californian lawyer would have little hope of winning over the working-class voters so pivotal to Trump's electoral success. All that might still turn out to be true. But for now, there's no denying the momentum.

Against Biden, Trump appeared inevitable. But as of this week, national polls show Harris leading. Satisfaction with the choice of candidates has tripled among Democrats since Biden withdrew, and increased by more than half among independent voters. Democrats are positively enthused: 62 per cent support Harris "strongly", compared with 34 per cent for Biden. Young voters, black voters, white voters without a college degree, independent voters – Harris is doing better with almost every demographic.

And then there's the vibe. Her rally crowds are huge, the donations are flooding in, and Trump suddenly seems all at sea: unable to land a blow and talking wildly about Harris not really being black and having fake, AI-generated crowds. He, the master of the derisive nickname, can't settle on one for her.

He's still complaining that it was "not fair" that Harris replaced Biden, repeatedly calling it a "coup" and "perhaps another form of election interference". All of which seems to be concerning onceconfident Republicans.

"Fewer insults, more insights" advised Trump's former campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway. "Quit whining," pleaded Nikki Haley, who only last month spoke at the Republican National Convention to give Trump her "strong endorsement". She elaborated: "The campaign is not going to win talking about crowd sizes, it's not going to win talking about what race Kamala Harris is, it's not going to win talking about whether she's dumb."

Trump is not disorientated simply because he's behind in the polls. He's been there before with Hillary Clinton in 2016, and coped fine. He's disorientated because Harris' momentum has a particular character. It's the speed of the thing, the whiplash, even the euphoria of it. This is the momentum of freshness.

I have no doubt this freshness is a product of circumstance. Harris is not fresh because she's an electric figure in the Obama mould. She's fresh because by the end, Joe Biden wasn't. Just as food tastes better after a fast, or sunshine is more vivid after weeks of rain, Harris' vitality is in direct proportion to Biden's tiredness. The "change" she represents is more aesthetic than anything. Presidents set the tone of their administration, and her tone is wholly different to Biden's. That she's a woman of colour only heightens that sense.

That disorientates Trump because his style of politics is really the politics of insurgency. And insurgency needs an incumbent. In that respect, Clinton was Trump's perfect foil: the ultimate establishment figure – the system personified. But in 2020, Trump was the incumbent. The US had seen almost 400,000 people die from COVID. He couldn't rail against this because it had occurred on his watch. Indeed, he could scarcely even acknowledge America's pain. So, he ran aground

against Biden, whose strong suit, informed by his own life story, is empathy and mourning.

By this year, the roles were reversed. Biden carried the weight of incumbency and looked fatigued by it, Trump returned to insurgency, and accordingly had Biden's measure. But the switch to Harris now denies Trump the incumbent he craves. That is why Harris' apparent weaknesses suddenly seem to work in her favour. She has earned few rave reviews as vice president. Biden gave her little of consequence to do. Even her work on illegal immigration – Trump's clearest line of attack – had nothing to do with policing the border, but was instead to develop a long-term response to the root causes of the problem. The fact Harris has been relatively anonymous, once the sign of an underwhelming VP, is now the very thing that enables her to appear new.

The Democrats' main task now is to tell voters who Harris is in a very short period of time. To be sure, that carries risks: if they don't fill in the gaps, there's every chance the Republicans will find a way to do that, allowing Trump to regain his footing and sharpen his attack. And perhaps that process will gather pace once the honeymoon gives way to scrutiny.

For now, though, Trump is by far the more familiar figure, the one with more well-worn moves, the much more clearly defined target. In a contest between him and Harris, he feels more incumbent than her. So, she takes aim, while he is busy trying to fight a phantom. And while she lands the odd blow, he seems a touch haunted.

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