

United States (Presidential Election): Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and the Limits of Representation

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[Joe Biden](#) began his speech to accept the Democratic Party's nomination with a quote from the civil-rights radical and Black revolutionary Ella Baker: "Give people light and they will find a way." Though Baker may have been commenting on her particular approach to organizing, Biden used the line as an analogy for his campaign to replace Donald Trump. Biden's reference to Baker did not surprise so much as it confirmed that Party leaders have a central fear about his candidacy: that Biden, like Hillary Clinton, fails to excite young Black voters in ways necessary to insure victory against Donald Trump. In the 2016 Presidential election, Black voter turnout declined for the first time in twenty years, dropping from sixty-seven to sixty per cent. But, in his speech, Biden recognized Baker's person while ignoring her anti-capitalist politics. That choice only accentuated his selection of a Black woman, [Kamala Harris](#), as a running mate without offering an explanation of how such gestures toward change will turn into the material goods that millions of Black women desperately need.

Biden's selection of Harris is, in many ways, quite remarkable. Black women are, in general, one of the most oppressed and marginalized groups in the United States. The median wealth of a single Black woman in this country is a mere two hundred dollars. Black women are overrepresented in the ranks of the poor, in part because they make only [sixty-two cents](#) to every dollar made by white men. Nearly a quarter of Black women live under the official poverty line. If the well-being of Black children may be taken as a barometer of their mothers', then the facts that twenty-nine per cent of Black children live under the poverty line and that another fifty-seven per cent are classified as low-income are dark reminders that inequality in this country is deeply bound up with race and gender. For any Black woman to rise to become a major party's nominee for Vice-President of the United States is certainly evidence that some things, indeed, have changed in this country.

But it is surprising, if not ironic, that Biden was the candidate to make this selection. For decades, as Democrats beat a race-baiting retreat from the explosion of civil-rights legislation in the nineteen-sixties, Biden, as a senator from the country's second-smallest state, Delaware, carved out a space for himself as a cultural warrior who was particularly adept at exploiting racial resentment for political gain. In the eighties, as political winds were blowing to the right, Biden staked out his opposition to welfare as an entitlement. In 1988, he [remarked](#) about public assistance in the United States, "Unfortunately, our current system of welfare has failed to meet the goal of self-improvement and has relieved the recipients of the incentive to take control of their future." By 1996, when then President Bill Clinton signed landmark legislation that ended welfare as a public entitlement, [Biden was one of twenty-four Democratic senators](#) who voted for the regressive legislation. The attack on welfare in the nineteen-eighties and nineties used poor Black women as fodder to dismantle the country's barely existent welfare state. White women were the majority of welfare recipients in 1996, yet when Clinton signed the legislation, he had two Black women who had been recipients standing beside him.

Biden's role as the architect of the 1994 Crime Bill has been well interrogated, but his rhetoric

painting Black communities as nests of crime has not been properly acknowledged, as part of a pattern of demonizing poor Black women and mothers for political gain. In 1993, as Biden drummed up support for his crime bill, he described Black juvenile offenders—otherwise known as children—as “predators on our streets.” He went on to describe “a cadre of young people, tens of thousands of them, born out of wedlock, without parents, without supervision, without any structure, without any conscience developing, because they literally . . . have not been socialized, they literally have not had an opportunity.” He added, “It doesn’t matter whether or not they were deprived as a youth. It doesn’t matter whether or not they had no background that enabled them to become socialized into the fabric of society. It doesn’t matter whether or not they’re the victims of society. The end result is they’re about to knock my mother on the head with a lead pipe, shoot my sister, beat up my wife, take on my sons.”

This, of course, was not only about supposedly out-of-control youngsters; it was also an indictment of Black families and Black mothers as a source of disorder that, if unchecked, threatened to undermine white families as well. Biden has never taken responsibility for his overheated rhetoric and its role in demonizing Black families and thoroughly racializing crime. Unlike Bill and Hillary Clinton, who both accepted some modicum of responsibility for their role in promoting racist narratives about African-Americans and crime, Biden has blithely [offered](#) that, “I haven’t always been right. I know we haven’t always gotten things right, but I’ve always tried.”

Finally, consider Biden’s performance at the congressional hearing to adjudicate [Anita Hill’s](#) charges of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas. At the hearing, in 1991, Biden, then the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, would not allow three women to testify in corroboration of Hill’s version of events; he also stood by as white men from the Republican Party verbally pummelled Hill in an effort to discredit and undermine her claims. Last year, in response to renewed criticism of his passivity in the face of the Republicans’ orchestrated harassment of Hill, Biden once again averted responsibility. “I’m sorry for the way she got treated,” he said. “Look at what I said and didn’t say; I don’t think I treated her badly.”

Given this history, it is, as Kamala Harris has said, absolutely audacious that Biden has selected her, a Black woman, as his running mate.

Biden has avoided any clear apology for his role in deepening the systemic racism in public policy that he now pledges to oppose. Nonetheless, his defenders dismiss his critics on the left as puerile and pedantic for rehashing this history. “Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good,” they hector. But Biden’s failure to meaningfully acknowledge his role in constructing the “color-blind” racial regime of the post-civil-rights era, structured around calls for law and order and the coded deprecation of poor Black women, has clouded his newfound epiphany concerning racial justice. It has obscured the credibility of his claims that, as President, he would essentially abandon the most notable feature of his political past: weaponizing reactionary thinking about poor Black women in order to curry favor with white voters, during a period when Democrats felt compelled to prove that they could hate Black people, too.

Biden has pointed to his selection as Barack Obama’s Vice-President, and his dutiful embrace of the role, as evidence that he has abandoned his provocative past positions. Now he has chosen Kamala Harris to perform the same perfuming role. There is an assumption that the selection of Harris means that her racial and gender identities will guide the policymaking of a Biden-Harris White House. This is the heralded power of representation in politics, and it is a powerful corral for the hopes of many Black Americans. The rise of Barack Obama convinced many Black voters that they might finally get a fair shake.

Of course, any reminder of Obama's Presidency should introduce a moment of sobriety into the ebullient celebrations of Harris as a heralded first. By the end of his first term, Obama [insisted](#) that he was "not the president of Black America." In an attempt to deflect the heavy demands that were gathering across Black America during and after the 2008 financial crisis, he took to publicly chastising poor and working-class Black families for what he believed they were not doing. Obama's vexing disposition towards ordinary Black people could be found in his patronizing remarks about Black parents when he was on the campaign trail in 2008. At one stop, in Beaumont, Texas, he famously said, "I know how hard it is to get kids to eat properly. . . . But I also know that folks are letting our children drink eight sodas a day, which some parents do, or, you know, eat a bag of potato chips for lunch or Popeyes for breakfast. Buy a little desk or put that child at the kitchen table. Watch them do their homework." Between the eruption of Occupy Wall Street in the first few years of his Presidency and the explosion of Black Lives Matter in its twilight, the limits of Obama's Blackness to alleviate suffering was a font of disappointment for ordinary Black people. By 2016, [fifty-two per cent of African Americans](#) said that Obama's policies had not gone far enough to improve their situation, an increase of twenty per cent from his first year as President.

The demand for racial representation in government has been a crucial part of politics in the post-civil-rights United States. It reflects the recognition that no one can speak for another group of people, let alone a group of people suffering from centuries of oppression and exploitation. They must be allowed to speak for themselves. As Black populations swelled in American cities, they demanded to be represented by people who came from their own neighborhoods, on the assumption that those people would be most familiar with and sympathetic to a political agenda that would advance the needs of Black communities. In the nineteen-sixties, it was reasonable to assume that Black elected officials would advance an agenda that supported African-Americans, because of their proximity to the insurgent Black movement. But, fifty years later, that assumption no longer holds true.

The end of legal segregation and the rise of a small Black political class and Black elite has resulted in tangible differences between those who hold elected office and the people they represent. We are living through a period of ascendant Black political power. Today, there are fifty-six Black members of Congress and thousands of other Black elected officials throughout the country. In a sharp departure from the politics of the nineteen-sixties, many of the large cities that exploded in fury over the murder of George Floyd this summer are governed by Black leaders. We are living in the recent shadow of a two-term Black President and two Black Attorneys General. And, despite this unprecedented concentration of Black political power, not much has changed for the vast majority of Black people. This was certainly true before the ravages of [COVID-19](#) measured the exact depths of racial injustice in the country. There may be a multitude of contextual factors and contingencies that explain the impotence of the Black political class to change the conditions experienced by ordinary Black people, but those explanations do not change that basic reality.

Black Americans, especially the insurgent youth of the Black Lives Matter generation, are being asked to put that very recent history aside, to ignore precedent and their own lived experience under Obama, in order to believe that having a Black woman as Vice-President will be especially beneficial to Black women. Of course, those who champion this line also decry critiques of Harris's [dubious](#) record as the California Attorney General and San Francisco's District Attorney. They say that it's unfair and unrealistic to expect that one Black woman would have the clout to challenge decades of ingrained racism in the California criminal-justice system. As Peter Beinart of *The Atlantic* [put it](#) when Harris exited the Presidential race, "had Harris—especially as a black woman—been the crusading criminal-justice reformer that Democrats now want to see, she would likely never have been in a position to run for president in the first place." But if ascending to public office necessitates adapting to the prevailing political wisdom, even when it is harmful to those you

claim to represent, then what is the point?

It is often assumed that race and gender alone impart empathic insights into the conditions of marginalization and oppression. This, of course, is what drove the demand that a Black woman be placed on the Democratic ticket and underlies much of the enthusiasm for Harris. But class position also dictates or, at least, guides political choices and commitments. There was a time when, if a Black woman was running for political office, then it could be assumed that she was working class, like the New York representative Shirley Chisholm. But this is no longer the case. The median net wealth in the U.S. Congress is just over a [million dollars](#), and Harris's wealth has been estimated at [six million dollars](#), after her marriage to the attorney Douglas Emhoff. There is an expectation that, by way of lived experience, Black women will have particular insight into the plight of poor and marginalized people. But there, rightly, is almost no expectation that a millionaire would naturally understand the plight of poor women, summoning the long-standing complaint about the influence of money in politics.

There is little consideration of how a municipal administrator's class standing may complicate solidarities with those it is simply assumed they will represent. This is especially true for Black elected officials, many of whom come from working-class origins but whose class standing shifts when they move into political office. In May, 2018, LaToya Cantrell became the first Black woman to be elected as mayor of New Orleans. Cantrell, who first moved to New Orleans in 1990, in order to attend Xavier, a historically Black university, was deeply involved in community organizing in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and served on the city council for six years before ascending to the position of mayor. Despite this background of community engagement, Cantrell has stood on the sidelines during a strike by a small group of Black sanitation workers, over demands for hazard pay and P.P.E. during the pandemic. Sanitation work is outsourced in New Orleans, allowing contracting companies to pay workers less than the city's living-wage ordinance allows. In this case, when the sanitation workers decided to strike, one of the subcontractors procured a contract for prison laborers, who worked for even less than the striking workers. Even as these "essential workers" have called upon the mayor to help them secure P.P.E. and better pay, Cantrell has refused to intervene directly, saying that these issues are between the contractor and the workers. There is no inherent solidarity along the lines of race, and, when class conflict is introduced into the calculation, it is even more fraught.

Black feminists have long insisted that we understand Black women as having multiple social identities, which coexist simultaneously; they are almost never reducible to a single one of those identities. And class position is not an intangible extra that can be discarded when we talk about representation. Indeed, it was Black women's class position as poor workers, often domestic laborers, that gave them a vantage point from below and fuelled their tendency towards radical politics. These politics were not a product of moral superiority but of living with poverty amid plenty, which made them understand that poverty was not caused by lack of work but by the absence of money and resources. Audre Lorde, in an essay titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," excoriated white feminists for engaging in the exclusionary practices of the dominant society, when a conference she was attending invited only two Black women to contribute to the program. She [implored](#) them to take up categories of difference, including race, gender, sexuality, and class, not as a punch list but as a way to "deal with the differences between us, and the resulting differences in our oppressions." If they did not do so, Lorde said, it would mean "that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable."

When we remove class from that which is being represented in politics, we have excised a source of empathy toward working-class people, and of comprehension and willingness to act on the issues that most affect poor Black women. These insights are, after all, what we are grasping for in demanding that race, gender, and sexual orientation be embodied in the political world; we are

assuming that an elected official will never fully understand oppression unless one has fully experienced it. In this sense, [Cori Bush](#), a Black woman and nurse from St. Louis, Missouri, who recently won a primary upset against a ten-term Black representative named Lacy Clay, whose father held his seat before him, is much more of an inheritor of the legacy of Shirley Chisholm than Kamala Harris, who backed the well-connected Clay over Bush.

This doesn't mean that Kamala Harris's elite class position precludes her from following through on her promises to pursue policies that will help Black women and others stuck at the bottom of the American social order. Nor does it mean that her class position will shield her from the vicious racism and sexism that defines the mainstream Republican Party. Trump, who began his political career questioning Obama's citizenship, has already questioned Harris's eligibility to run; it is insidious. But her race and gender identity as a Black woman do not guarantee that she will champion a Black-centered agenda. The celebrations of symbolic firsts can crowd out the possibility of substantive conversations about what those officials will do to transform the conditions of those they claim to represent. The unspoken promise of racial representation is that social, economic, and political dynamics can change when someone from a marginalized group is at the helm. Too often, however, in Black politics, symbolism has stood in for making a meaningful difference in the lives of Black people.

Ending Trump's dismal rule is of critical importance—but we should be stone-cold sober about the reality of mainstream politics in the United States. We heard much about the evils of Donald Trump at the Democratic National Convention, but where were the clear policy initiatives to confront systemic racism, grotesque inequality, and the embarrassing shortage of housing in the world's richest country? The Party's platform contains promises to eradicate those emblems of inequality, but this is true every election season, with results seldom realized. The pandemic continues to push the contradictions of U.S. society to its surface, and, in doing so, it makes clear the necessity of radical solutions. This need stands in sharp contrast with Biden's political instincts as a deficit hawk and Harris's inexperience as a legislator. It also wildly collides with their mutual fidelity to a market economy that has produced such historic inequality in the first place. The Democratic themes of "affordable" health care, housing, and child care ring hollow with tens of millions out of work, on the brink of homelessness, and hungry. And when Black women are the most likely to be hurt by this market-bred scarcity, we need more than the tropes of Blackness and the imagined solidarity implicit within them.

The scale of these crises would seem to necessitate a dramatic political response. But that is no guarantee that we will get one. After Barack Obama was elected in 2008, many expected major reforms to the financial system and the social-welfare state to rescue the general public from the shrapnel of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Instead, Obama acted haltingly and in ways that allowed many of the spoils of the recovery to flow to the elite. It was no coincidence that Occupy Wall Street and the slogan "We are the ninety-nine per cent" burst into the streets of the U.S. in the heart of his first term.

The emerging populist, anti-racist movement of the past few months has exposed to the world that the issues raised by Occupy and the first iteration of Black Lives Matter have not gone anywhere: they have become only worse. The movement has also revealed the scale of protest that will be necessary if Biden and Harris win and fail to live up to their lofty promises. A recurring theme of the D.N.C. was "restoring the soul of the nation." But if restoration is simply about returning to the conditions that have brought us to this chaotic moment, then even more intense protests may well be on the horizon. We may have just experienced the largest participation in marches and protests in U.S. history under Trump, but we would be remiss to forget that Black Lives Matter erupted as a movement during Obama's Presidency.

Raised and dashed expectations can be a volatile mix. In her autobiography, from 1970, Shirley Chisholm recognized the dynamic in her own radicalization when she wrote, “I used to be a moderate. I spent twenty years going to all kinds of meetings, trying to find ways all of us, black and white, could work together. Thousands like me kept saying, ‘Let us in a little. Give us a piece of the pie.’ What happened? Watts, Newark, Hartford. And what was the reaction? We started to hear a new jargon about the ‘urban crisis’ and ‘law and order’ and ‘crime in the streets.’ Today, I am a militant. Basically I agree with what many of the extremist groups are saying—*except* that their tactics are wrong and too often they have no program. But people had better start to understand that if this country’s basic racism is not quickly and completely abolished . . . there will be real, full-scale revolution in the streets. I do not want to see that day come. But I think often of what Malcolm once said about freedom: ‘You get your freedom by letting your enemy know that you’ll do anything to get your freedom. Then you’ll get it. It’s the only way you’ll get it.’ ”

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<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/joe-biden-kamala-harris-and-the-limits-of-representation>