

Why Kamala Harris was a safe Vice Presidential choice for Joe Biden

Joe Biden's "veepstakes" are finally over: The Democratic nominee for president has chosen California Senator Kamala Harris as his vice-presidential running mate. In this Q&A, [Thomas Gift](#) examines what may have tipped the scales in favor of Harris, the pros and cons of her selection, and how she may influence the 2020 race for the White House.

Why do you think Joe Biden chose Kamala Harris for his running mate?

California Senator Kamala Harris's main political advantage is that she's a known quantity: She's been nationally vetted, is a high-profile figure, and has a track-record which suggests she won't wilt under the bright lights of a national campaign. Despite her [early exit from the 2019 Democratic presidential primaries](#), Harris won plaudits from both progressives and moderates alike for her no-nonsense approach to attacking Trump. Although her home state of California is already a lock for Biden in 2020, Harris can appeal to voters in key swing states like Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The fact that Harris is the [first African-American and Asian-American](#) selected as a VP candidate for a major party also isn't lost on Biden in the current political moment.

Does Harris check the box in terms of having the requisite experience to be VP?

There's little doubt that Harris is qualified to be VP. That's not to say that other candidates [rumored to be on Biden's shortlist](#)—such as Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and Ambassador Susan Rice—couldn't also lay claim to that credential. But Harris is clearly a seasoned public official. She's served as US Senator from California since 2017 and, previously, as Attorney General of California and District Attorney of San Francisco. Her reputation for political savvy and competence inside the Beltway is well-established. Especially with Biden's age (he is 78 to Harris's 55), the ability to take over as president certainly took on heightened importance in this year's veepstakes. Harris's resume makes it hard for Trump to criticize her as unfit for being a "heartbeat away" from the Oval Office.

Was Biden's decision to choose Harris as his VP at all a surprise?

Harris is as much a predictable choice as she is a safe one. Although some Democrats would've preferred Biden make a more audacious move, few will be surprised by his pick. Biden seems to have applied the "first, do no harm" principle in selecting Harris. He's roughly [8 percentage points up in the polls](#), is watching Trump's approval ratings decline, and is thinking that taking risks right now is unwarranted. In other words, this isn't time for a Hail Mary pass. Harris isn't a perfect choice for Biden—no one is. She'll alienate some on the left who think she's too moderate, and some in the center who think she's too liberal. Of the likely candidates on Biden's shortlist, however, Harris is probably the most satisfactory choice across the ideological spectrum.

Are there any clear downsides of Biden choosing Harris?

Amid national calls for criminal justice reform—and even ["defunding" the police](#) within certain segments of the Democratic party—at least one line on Harris's resume will invite closer scrutiny. Increasingly, some voices on the left have [raised questions](#) about Harris's record as Attorney General of California, alleging a failure to more aggressively intervene against police brutality and killings. If voters perceive a disconnect—between Harris's recent words favoring law enforcement reform, and the details of her own record as a prosecutor—that could hurt her with progressives. The operative question will be how she defends herself against those charges. Given the alternative, though, it's hard to see those voters not casting their ballot for Biden-Harris on Election Day.

Will Biden's choice of Harris have a major impact on the race?

Harris's selection may give Biden a short-term boost in the polls, but it probably won't change the race in a big way. Citizens still vote primarily for the top-of-ticket. Because Trump is such a polarizing figure, the 2020 election will almost surely be a referendum on the president. Trump's team continues to poke fun of Biden for running his campaign from his [basement](#) and for failing to be more visible in the midst of a national contest. But the fact is, there's no reason for Biden to be aggressive. As long as Trump's poll numbers continue to tumble and voters perceive the White House as mishandling the [twin crises of COVID-19 and a cratering economy](#), Biden is smart to be cautious. His choice of Harris reflects that play-it-safe approach.

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