INTERVIEWS 23.07.2024

'Anything is possible, but it won't be easy for the Democrats'

Jörg Wimalasena on Kamala Harris' candidacy and the odds of beating Donald Trump

Following weeks of debate, Joe Biden has decided not to run for re-election to the US presidency. A decision that deserves respect or rather a late realisation by the President?

The decision would have deserved respect if he had made it a year ago - or even better, two years ago. Then the Democrats would still have had the opportunity to agree on a different candidate with the involvement of their own voters in a proper primary. Instead, he organised primaries with the help of the Democratic National Committee, in which there was basically no open competition. In some cases, the delegates were simply allocated to Biden, for example in Florida, without there having been an actual primary. There were no TV debates. Opposing candidates like Dean Philipps were hardly seen on television. They tried to somehow drag Biden across the finish line. Also by structuring the primary election calendar in such a way that the states in which he was doing well were the first to vote. To resign now, after the whole world could see that he is no longer up to the job, is not really worthy of respect, but rather raises the question of why this did not happen much earlier. Especially when democracy and victory against Donald Trump are so important to Biden, according to his own statements.

Joe Biden has proposed his Vice President Kamala Harris as his successor. How suitable is she for the most powerful office in the world and what are her chances of beating Donald Trump in November?

I think she is completely unsuitable. The Democrats have relied on rich donors and the metropolitan, professional managerial class for years, especially during Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign. As a result, Trump's populism, some of it cheap but some of it entirely justified, has drawn the working class much closer to him. Joe Biden won in

2020 partly because he was able to win back some of these voters. As president, he has also convincingly shown that he really cares about the concerns of the little people. He has also supported and strengthened trade unions during his time in office. This delicate rapprochement with the working class could now be lost if he is replaced by someone like Kamala Harris, who likes to make flowery speeches and place her identity as a black woman at the centre of her appearance. This is habitually exactly the wrong approach for an election campaign in which Donald Trump has chosen J.D. Vance, who comes from a working-class family in Appalachia and is able to speak the language of the workers, as his vice-presidential candidate.

Kamala Harris' presidential campaign ended in 2019 before the first primary. She does not make a happy impression as vice-president either. Her poll ratings are poor. Why does the Democratic party establishment believe it can win with her?

I'm not entirely convinced that they believe that at all. Maybe they are just pushing her forward so that other, more suitable candidates are not used up in an election in which anyone else would also have a bad chance. But I think another reason is more important: the Democratic party establishment, with its big donors and important figures such as the Clintons, has an interest in ensuring that the party remains 'centrist'. There is also a certain preference for identity politics, for symbolic politics. Overly harsh demands for redistribution, such as those made by socialist Senator Bernie Sanders - or many on the left of the party - are not entirely welcome. In Kamala Harris, we have a well-adjusted and predictable candidate, who in any case will not be calling for a socialist revolution tomorrow.

Influential Democrats such as the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, as well as members of the Democratic National Committee, which is organising the Democratic Party Convention in August, are speaking out in favour of Harris by the dozen. She is said to have already secured the delegate votes needed for her nomination. Do other potential candidates even have a chance at this stage?

Theoretically yes, practically no. Who would dare to challenge Harris now when large sections of the party establishment have already backed her? Nobody wants to be the bogeyman who disrupts this beautiful new harmony that has now been forged. The fact that Bernie Sanders was the only popular candidate to challenge Hillary Clinton in 2016 and pursue left-wing policy projects was also due to the fact that he is not a member of the Democrats and does not accept large donations. He is also uncontroversial in his home state of

Vermont. An independence that he has earned over decades - you have to look for people with this much backbone with a magnifying glass in the Democratic Party - and you probably still won't find them.

And you would need backbone to stand in Harris' way. After all, you would have to criticise her publicly and the party would not appear united. Ultimately, one would be seen as divisive and would be held responsible for another four years of Trump in the event of an election defeat. Bernie Sanders already had this experience after 2016. Everyone in the Democratic Party knows that the decision to enter the ring against them now would not exactly have a positive effect on their own careers.

The Democrats are loudly in favour of saving democracy. Doesn't voting in a non-open process contradict this claim?

Yes, of course. What is needed now is a debate about the party's personal and substantive direction. But instead, with Kamala Harris, we have been presented with a candidate and can do more or less nothing about it. If you want to save democracy, you should start with yourself and adhere to democratic standards. Otherwise, the mission does not look particularly credible.

The DNC has not behaved particularly honourably in past primaries either and, among other things, gave Hillary Clinton an advantage over Bernie Sanders in 2016. There is a very urgent need for reform in the Democratic Party. At its core, the party is completely rotten and does not even begin to live up to the high moral standards it formulates. The necessary reform process can of course hardly be initiated shortly before the election, but in years to come there should be a party leadership that does not primarily act as an extension of the respective president or the party establishment. There must be open competition - for personnel and ideas. And the Democrat-affiliated media cosmos - especially the 'news' channel MSNBC - should also consider whether journalism should really mean acting largely as a mouthpiece for the mainstream of the Democratic Party.

What would the Democrats have to do to win the election?

Perhaps luck will be enough; the last few weeks have shown that political situations can change quickly. And perhaps Harris will surprise with a good campaign. But in terms of content, the course is already being set in the wrong direction. The strategy that is now emerging is as follows: Harris used to be Attorney General in California and the message is supposed to be: I am the prosecutor and Donald Trump, with his numerous convictions, is the defendant whom I am virtually holding accountable. Like in a badly written

courtroom drama script. But that's absolutely the wrong approach. I don't believe that it will be decisive for the election whether Trump paid bribes to a porn actress at some point or whether he creatively structured his business balance sheet in order to get a favourable loan. That won't work. People are struggling with a horrendous cost of living crisis. Constantly pointing out how bad Trump is won't work. On the other hand, it wouldn't be very credible to send Kamala Harris to trade union events wearing a hard hat. In an election campaign, the person has to match the content. The Democrats would have to focus hard on the so-called bread-and-butter issues: Cost of living, health insurance, good wages, working conditions. Pulling this off successfully with this candidate, however, is very difficult.

According to polls, Donald Trump is just as unpopular as Kamala Harris. Can't he be beaten after all?

Yes, of course he can be beaten. A lot is in motion, nobody knows what will happen before the election. What has happened in the last three or four weeks alone is enough for a cinema blockbuster in several parts. Anything is possible, but it won't be easy for the Democrats.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Jörg Wimalasena
Berlin

Jörg Wimalasena is a political correspondent for WELT. He was previously editor for health and social policy at 'taz' and US correspondent for 'Zeit-Online' in New York.