DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 23.08.2024 | Reinhard Krumm

‘Rhetorical fireworks of the superstars’

The party convention has given the Democrats a boost of energy. Reinhard Krumm from Chicago on the Harris campaign

The nomination of Kamala Harris as presidential candidate has revitalised the party. Already, comparisons with Barack Obama were doing the rounds. What was the atmosphere like at the party conference?

The atmosphere at the party conference was great. Not only for an observer like me, who was experiencing such a spectacle for the first time, but also for those who had been there before. There were rhetorical fireworks from the superstars of the Democratic Party. The Clintons, the Obamas, even Oprah Winfrey, wowed the audience with their speeches. The Democratic Party gave a united impression without wing fights: all in favour of presidential candidate Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz.

The head of the delegate group from Minnesota, the state from which Governor Tim Walz hails, remarked to me that the atmosphere at this convention surpassed that of the first Obama campaign in 2008. That kind of energy should carry over to campaign offices across the US.

A good indicator is the amount of campaign donations received, the number of volunteers and the poll results. Harris has raised a remarkable 204 million US dollars since the start of her campaign, while her opponent Donald Trump has only raised a comparatively modest 48 million during this time. The number of volunteers has increased significantly, according to the delegates I was able to speak to. And the polls are also much more positive than in the last few weeks under the Biden candidacy. Harris is now at least catching up with her rival, and some institutes even see her with a slight advantage.

Nevertheless, Donald Trump has been clearly portrayed as a threat to democracy in the US and to international security. He is no longer

primarily accused of individual lies or of humiliating his Democratic rivals. The Democrats portray him as a weak, egotistical politician who is uninterested in the common good. In contrast, the Democrats portray Kamala Harris as a tough Attorney General with the slogan 'For the People' and Coach Walz as the governor of the state of Minnesota and a down-to-earth ex-football coach.

And what insights has Harris given into her programme? What issues is she focussing on in particular?

Party conventions in the US are not programmatic, but emotional. It's about answering the most important question for voters: Who is fighting for me? Is the person credible? The candidate's background, credibility and achievements to date are important here. This positive definition of Kamala Harris in particular but also of Tim Walz, who is relatively unknown in the population, was the task of the party conference. Also in order to avoid a negative characterisation by the Republicans.

But the programme is not completely absent, of course. The 2024 Democratic Party Platform, written before Joe Biden stepped down as presidential candidate, is a kind of party programme. It lists nine chapters on 92 pages. But they are not referred to in the speeches. Rather, it is about the conciseness and memorability of individual statements, which are then widely disseminated on social media and by influencers. One MP openly confirmed that it comes down to two or three crucial statements that form the thematic basis and which the party then sticks to. For Harris it is abortion policy – freedom over one's own body – and economic policy for working people, so not just those in the labour force but also the middle class.

How exactly should this happen? In her first programmatic speech as a candidate before the party conference, she gave an initial insight into her economic positions. She focussed more on reducing prices, while Biden's economic policy concentrated on the big picture, i.e. job creation. Economically unwise, say experts, because the promise can hardly be realised. After all, how can high prices for essentials be capped in a free market economy like the US? And yet they say that the proposals are politically clever because it shows that the Democrats have recognised the problem.

She has been receiving more praise for ideas on affordable housing, which is another major problem in a country where people predominantly buy rather than rent housing. This involves supporting companies that can offer small houses at low prices. And secondly, favourable loans for people who want to buy a house for the first time. In her powerful speech at the party conference, Kamala

Harris spoke about a new path for the US into the future. She said she was striving for an economy of opportunity to strengthen the middle class.

A key challenge for Harris appears to be distancing herself from Biden where necessary – for example with regard to the high cost of living and inflation – while at the same time benefiting from the government's successes, such as the low unemployment rate and investments in infrastructure, chip manufacturing and clean energy. An impossible balancing act?

The party convention had exactly this goal — to thank President Joe Biden on the one hand and to open a new chapter, the Harris chapter, on the other. For this reason, President Joe Biden appeared on the very first day of the party conference. He was celebrated not only for having won against Donald Trump in 2020 with a record result of around 81 million votes, but also for his withdrawal from a second term.

Whether it was Michelle and Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey or the speeches of the vice president and the candidate, they did not explicitly turn away from the previous Biden-Harris policy. Instead, they focussed on the issues that are key to the Democratic Party, such as abortion and the economy. This is where the public is most critical because of the high cost of essential consumer goods: basic foodstuffs, fast food, medicines and petrol.

A possible President Harris would also have to ensure that global economic relations become more stable again. A self-centred economic policy with high punitive tariffs alone will not help the US in the medium and long term. This is why Democrats are no longer just talking about decoupling, but also about de-risking when it comes to economic relations with China.

To beat Trump, Harris must win over a broad electorate, from educated voters in the coastal states to voters without a university degree — especially in the swing states. How can she do that?

The balancing act of convincing both the well-educated and the less well-educated through a programme is a familiar and inevitable stretch. In addition to the above-mentioned focus on the specific economic challenges facing the citizens of the US – the framework conditions developed by Biden have been described by experts as generally successful – it is also about defining the political goal for the coming years. The Democrats are not only aiming for the presidency, but also the start of a long-term policy. Things should and must be fairer in the US, as left-wing politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

demanded in her speech.

The Democrats hope that Kamala Harris would be able to convey this new beginning well, as no politician from the Bush, Clinton or Trump families has stood for election since 1981, when George Bush was Ronald Reagan's running mate. At 59, Harris is a young candidate, especially compared to 78-year-old Donald Trump. She is expected to set strong political accents not only domestically, but also in foreign policy, thus creating a movement that could carry the Democratic Party into the White House for many years to come.

What can Europe expect from a President Harris — especially in view of the war in Ukraine?

So far, foreign policy has only played a minor role in Kamala Harris' thematic line-up, as it did in all of her speeches at the party convention. A Harris foreign policy doctrine has not yet been formulated. Nevertheless, politicians and experts endeavoured to create some clarity around the party conference. According to this, the Democratic Party will continue to rely on international organisations such as the United Nations in the future, but with the approach of reforming them to meet future challenges.

And these have grown significantly with China, in the first place, but also Russia, Iran and North Korea. In this environment, the US will act as a military superpower, but not alone, only with partners. Harris' previous security adviser, Philip Gordon, is a self-confessed transatlanticist, with the Financial Times describing him as a 'foreign policy pragmatist'. To date, he has left no doubt about his support for Ukraine. As far as relations with the EU are concerned, he is in favour of greater autonomy for the EU and a better working basis for sharing the costs of military cooperation with the US. This would be the expected change in foreign policy compared to the Biden presidency.

The party conference was accompanied by pro-Palestinian demonstrations against the Biden government's support for Israel. What role does the Middle East conflict play in the election campaign?

The area around the party convention itself, which was held in the United Arena where the famous Chicago Bulls basketball team usually plays, as well as around selected hotels where the delegates and Democratic Party delegates stayed, was extensively secured with a large Secret Service presence on all four days of the convention. This was partly due to the security breaches that made the assassination attempt on Donald Trump possible in the first place and partly for fear of large demonstrations against the war in Gaza. President Joe Biden in particular was accused of not having campaigned hard

enough for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

However, the conflict is not at the forefront of voters' minds; the economic challenges are too great for that. But the conflict does indeed also have domestic political components. One of them is that the state of Michigan has a large Arab-American population. Biden was able to win the state in 2020. Without a victory in Michigan, it will be difficult for the Democrats to win the national elections in November.

Kamala Harris has been more outspoken on the issue. She has called for human rights to be respected in the conflict - and that vis-à-vis Israel. Perhaps one reason why the demonstrations were much smaller and more peaceful. At the same time, she clearly underlined Israel's right to defence. At the party conference, she called for a hostage agreement, a ceasefire and a peaceful and secure future for Palestine.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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