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Kamala Harris and the Complexity of Racial Identity Politics

By Vinay Harpalani

Race and the Law Prof Blog
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On December 3, Senator Kamala Harris ended her bid to become the 2020 Democratic nominee for President. Harris has been the most prominent and popular woman of color to be a major party presidential candidate in any election cycle [1]. Back in February 2019, shortly after she had announced her candidacy, [I wrote about Harris's diverse background and multiple identities](#). I posed the question of whether she could employ those identities as effectively as Barack Obama did during his 2008 campaign and subsequent presidency. I concluded by noting that “watching Kamala Harris over the next year may provide many lessons not only on racial identity politics, but also on success and progress in an increasingly diverse America.

Sadly, the lessons were mostly about challenges and divides rather than success and progress. Harris and Obama both had to deal with racism, but Harris also had to confront the unique challenges that women of color, and particularly Black women, face as candidates for leadership positions. Her campaign highlighted the sexist lens through which we judge such candidates—paralleling the gendered nature of Hillary Clinton's failed bid in 2016. Additionally, Harris's experience illustrated tensions among the Black electorate, with its various cultural and generational divides. Racial identity politics are often framed in a simplistic, “Black-and-White” manner, but Kamala Harris—even more than Barack Obama—shows how racial identity politics are more complicated and constantly evolving.

One of Barack Obama's biggest challenges was to mitigate racial stereotypes in front of a national audience, much of which was initially skeptical of him. But Obama was well-equipped for this challenge. His background as the [first Black Editor-in-Chief of the Harvard Law Review](#), among many other accomplishments, quelled most doubts about his intelligence. Obama carefully cultivated a non-threatening persona—rarely did he appear confrontational, lest White Americans and others perceive him as hostile and intimidating. Instead, Obama exuded a dignified masculinity—he was smart, cool, assertive but not overbearing, and he was more relatable than one might expect from an Ivy League-educated law professor. His speaking style was well-polished, [“articulate”](#), and sometimes professorial—but with just enough fillers like “you know” to appear human and down-to-earth. His references to Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and other pop culture icons made him seem hip and in touch with young

people. Obama was also a loyal, family man—an image buttressed by the strong presence of First Lady Michelle Obama, along with their daughters, Malia and Sasha.

In this way, Obama presented himself as counterstereotypic: he defied every prominent negative stereotype of Black males and thus made himself electable. And as he aspired to become the first Black President—Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign was inspirational, almost by default. Even so, Obama faced racism in numerous forms: the birtherism promoted by Donald Trump, [accusations of being “uppity”](#), obstruction of his agenda, attempt to tarnish his legacy, and other types of disrespect [2].

But Kamala Harris had to deal with more than these racial stereotypes. Thirty years ago, Professor Kimberlee Crenshaw devised the concept of [intersectionality](#)—a framework that focuses on the dual oppression faced by members of multiple marginalized groups: for example, Black women facing the combined oppression of racism and sexism. Harris’s campaign embodied such intersectionality. She had to demonstrate that she was competent and assertive, but without appearing overbearing and unlikeable—lest she suffer the fate that Hillary Clinton did in 2016. While White male presidential candidates such as Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders can actually reap rewards for displays of anger and passion, women and minority candidates are often punished just for displaying ambition and assertiveness. These dilemmas were compounded for Harris because the media often portrays Black women in particular as irrationally aggressive. Harris often employed her background as a prosecutor to ask sharp questions and give pointed responses, but viewed through a racist and sexist lens, these actions also served to reinforce the [“angry Black woman”](#) stereotype. And unlike Obama, American gender norms did not afford Harris a way to avoid this stereotype and still be seen as a bold and assertive leader.

In their efforts to gain support from Black voters, Obama and Harris also both faced the dilemma of relating to African Americans. Neither of them had African American parents, and both had their Blackness (or at least their “African American-ness”) questioned—something that would not happen to White candidates who are courting Black voters [3]. Obama and Harris had to deal with the complex and sometimes contentious relationship between African Americans and Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean—a divide that has gradually become more nationally visible. During the 2000s, several academics pointed out that among Black students at elite universities, Black immigrants and their children are highly overrepresented compared to multigenerational African Americans [4]. This raised questions about whether affirmative action at elite universities was fair and just. In 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates published his well-known essay, [“The Case for Reparations.”](#) Public discourse on reparations has increased significantly, to the point where the issue has come up in the 2020 Democratic nomination process; in fact, candidate Marianne Williamson largely based her platform on a call for reparations [5]. Also, groups such as [American Descendants of Slaves \(ADOS\)](#) highlight not only the tremendous racial wealth gap rooted in slavery, but also the distinction between African Americans (many of whom have ancestors who were enslaved persons in America) and Black immigrants (who do not have such ancestors, even if they descend from enslaved persons elsewhere in the world).

Within this milieu, the [contrast between Obama and Harris](#) is also revealing. Obama's mother was White and his father was Kenyan. He was raised largely in Hawaii and Indonesia—places with very few African Americans. In his twenties, Obama did work as a community organizer in predominantly African American neighborhoods on the South Side of Chicago, where he developed relationships with various African American leaders. But Barack Obama's strongest connection to African American communities was his wife, Michelle Obama. She grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Both of her parents were descended from enslaved persons in South Carolina, and she had grown up with a keen awareness of her African American roots. Through her strong, graceful, and elegant presence, Michelle Obama herself was inspirational. She thus provided Barack with a foundation within African American communities that he may otherwise have lacked.

On the surface, Kamala Harris actually had more roots in African American communities than Obama. She was born in Oakland, California—for many years the hub of activism for the Black Panther Party—and she lived in the Bay Area for much of her childhood. Although they were not African American, Harris's parents were both people of color and were civil rights activists in the 1960s. Thus, they were more attuned to American racism than Obama's parents. As a child, Harris was part of the first group of students to desegregate Berkeley schools via a voluntary busing program. She attended a Black Baptist Church while growing up (along with a Hindu Temple), in contrast to Obama (who did not do so until his adulthood). Harris's college-age experiences also exemplified her identity as an African American woman: she attended Howard University and became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

In 2008, [Harris had defended Obama when some raised questions about his authenticity](#). But in 2019, she had to confront these issues in a more charged context—due to the rise of ADOS and developing discourse on reparations, affirmative action, and related issues. [ADOS and others questioned whether Kamala Harris could relate to the experiences of African Americans](#). Her background as a prosecutor also worked against her in African American communities, where the mass incarceration of Black men is a major concern. And importantly, Harris did not have Michelle Obama to anchor her connection to these communities. All of these challenges made it more difficult for Harris to gain a footing among African American voters.

Additionally, the 2020 Democratic nomination process illustrated the generational divide among Black voters, and it debunked the common belief that Black voters will simply prefer Black candidates. Former Vice President Joe Biden has led the polls among Black voters by a large margin. Biden's support comes largely from older Black voters, but even among Black voters age 18-29, Senator Bernie Sanders is the leading candidate—in spite of [his challenges connecting to Black communities](#). Biden's overall lead among Black voters has remained steady, in spite of criticisms of his record on racial issues, a series of racial gaffes that he has made, and repeated attempts by Harris and Senator Cory Booker to paint Biden as out of touch with Black voters. During the nationally televised Democratic primary debate on June 27,

2019, Harris confronted Biden on his opposition to court-ordered busing to achieve school desegregation back in the 1970s. She highlighted her own experience with busing and asked for Biden to apologize for his position. Right after the debate, Harris tweeted a picture of herself when she was a young girl, which humanized her and served to partially mitigate the “angry Black woman” image. But while Harris received a temporary boost in the polls from this exchange, she faltered when asked whether she would now support court-ordered busing. [Biden’s record and position on busing are more complicated and nuanced](#) than presented in the media, and [he is well-respected in Black communities as a proponent of civil rights](#). The exchange with Biden ultimately backfired for Harris [6]. In the next debate on July 31, Representative Tulsi Gabbard attacked Harris’s health care plan and her record as a prosecutor, and Harris appeared flustered by the criticism. Her poll numbers soon went back down, and she did not recover. Ultimately, although she had some prominent Black supporters, Harris did not fair particularly well among Black voters.

There were other reasons for the demise of Harris’s campaign. Barack Obama did not cement his support among Black voters until after he won the Iowa Caucuses, and Harris’s campaign did not last that long. Moreover, in contrast to Obama, whose only serious competition was Hillary Clinton, Harris had over 20 competitors, including several candidates of color. Thus, she could not garner the same amount of attention that Obama commanded. Harris had to work harder to distinguish herself from the field, and she struggled to do so.

[More general problems also plagued Harris’s campaign](#). She had trouble defining her vision, caught in between the moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic Party. Her changing position on health care exacerbated this dilemma. Additionally, her demeanor during the debates was not always friendly—a perception augmented by the race and gender biases noted earlier. Harking back to her days as a prosecutor, Harris sometimes came across as if she was lecturing or scolding the audience. [And she made some other mistakes](#).

But Kamala Harris was punished more for these types of mistakes than her White male colleagues were, and also more than Barack Obama was. Her candidacy underscored the multifaceted nature of racial identity politics, showing how these are infused with sexist gender norms, and with cultural and generational divides. And most significantly, it highlighted the difficult challenges that women of color—and especially Black women—face when pursuing their ambitions.

Notes:

[1] There have been a handful of women of color candidates in prior election cycles, including Shirley Chisholm, Patsy Mink, Carol Moseley Braun, Cynthia McKinney, and Lenora Fulani. Additionally, Tulsi Gabbard is a woman of color candidate for the 2020 Democratic nomination.

[2] Black commentators such as [Cornel West](#) and [Tavis Smiley](#) also criticized Obama for failing to address issues that were important to Black communities. Conversely, my mentor, the late Professor Derrick Bell, [was sometimes critical of Obama but also highlighted the difficult task faced by the first Black President](#)—the various directions

he would be pulled, and the virtually impossible balancing act that he would have to play. I will not speculate on which candidate Professor Bell would favor in the 2020 Democratic nomination process; however, I am quite sure he would agree with me (a relatively uncommon occurrence) that Kamala Harris faced an even more difficult balancing act.

[3] Although their Blackness is not questioned, White candidates do face criticism when they are unable to relate to Black communities. During, 2020 Democratic nomination season, Pete Buttigieg and [Bernie Sanders](#) in particular have faced this dilemma. Conversely, unlike [Buttigieg](#) and Sanders, [Joe Biden has a long history of reaching out to Black voters and has been given more leeway](#). Biden's connection to Barack Obama has also helped him greatly in this regard.

[4] These include Harvard professors [Lani Guinier and Henry Louis Gates](#), Indiana University law professor [Kevin Brown](#), University of Pennsylvania sociologist [Camille Charles](#), and Boston University School of Law Dean [Angela Onwuachi-Willig](#).

[5] In 2019, even conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a [column in favor of reparations](#).

[6] Cory Booker did not have any more success in his attempts to win over Black voters from Biden. For example, in the July 31, 2020, Biden and Booker had an exchange about their respective records on criminal justice issues. Booker said to Biden, "Mr. Vice President, there's a saying in my community: You're dipping into the Kool-Aid and you don't even know the flavor[.]" While some found this line to be clever, many found it to be trite, passé, and pandering. Ultimately, the exchange did not benefit Booker.

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