

Opinion A closer look at Harris shows how effective she's become

Jennifer Rubin :: 6/23/2024

Democracy Dies in Darkness

As the election nears, the vice president is connecting policy to lived experience.

On Friday, after the Supreme Court issued its latest [batch of opinions](#), I spoke briefly on the phone with Vice President Harris. After several days spent attending her appearances, it had become obvious to me that far from being a liability, as her critics insist, she is an effective communicator and skilled advocate — especially on causes on which she has developed expertise over decades.

Given the recent court scandals, I asked her about ethics reform. Even when in the Senate, she recalled, she supported a code of ethics for the Supreme Court. “The reasons are more evident today,” she said. She pointed to blindfolded Lady Justice. “This is how ingrained it is in our system of justice,” she added. “I’m concerned there has been loss of confidence” in the court, Harris said, highlighting not only ethics concerns but also the extreme ideology of a court that has shredded precedent.

From there she spoke passionately about her work since *Dobbs* to defend reproductive freedom. According to her office, since that decision, she has delivered scores of speeches and held more than 90 gatherings in 21 states (as well as convening groups at the White House) to discuss reproductive freedom with elected officials, health-care providers, faith leaders, students, and advocates. On her Fight for Our Freedoms College Tour, beginning in 2023, she raised the issue at college campuses.

Harris told me her campus visits have been standing room only, with overflow rooms. “Students stood in line for hours,” she said, “not for a rock concert, but to have a conversations with the vice president.” Contrary to the impression that Gen Z voters are disengaged, she came away “inspired” and more certain that they will mark a “sea change” in politics. Guns, [abortion](#) rights and climate are not academic issues to this generation. “It is a lived experience. In the height of their reproductive years, the Supreme Court took away the right to make decisions about their own body. . . . They understand we need practical solutions.”

Observing Harris last week, I could see the extent of her political maturation since her first year in office, [when withering](#) and often [baseless criticism](#) dominated coverage. Her delivery is crisp and authoritative. She appears relaxed, confident and centered in formal and informal settings. And she appears to relish taking on bullies. She can draw on not only three years of experience as vice president but 20 years or so as a prosecutor. “There are very few things I do now that I have not done over [that time],” she told me, pointing to a career that’s ranged from working as a line prosecutor to running the San Francisco agency for abused and neglected children to serving as California Attorney General and then its senator.

Certainly, since *Dobbs*, she has been [channeling righteous anger and wielding a sharper message](#), acting as the most active and effective administration voice on the subject. To mark *Dobbs*'s second anniversary, the administration unsurprisingly has put her front and center. She has never been under any illusion that the court would stop at abortion. In the decision, she told me, "Clarence Thomas said the quiet part out loud." He and other justices have their eye on *Griswold* (contraception) and *Obergefell* (same-sex marriage).

On Thursday, appearing with Chrissy Teigen at an event for abortion providers and activists, Harris decried the Supreme Court that "took a constitutional right away." In a conversational setting, she stressed that Trump intentionally appointed justices to undo *Roe* and "they did as he intended." She blasted "Trump abortion bans," including many that tell a rape survivor "who has had a violation of their body that she has no right to make a decision about what comes next. ... That's immoral," Harris declared indignantly.

She cited her own visit to an abortion clinic, which, she had observed, treated patients with dignity and respect, and her push to expand from three to 46 states, Medicaid coverage of postpartum care. But she also deftly told an audience of progressives, "We need to renew our commitment to coalition building." Pointing to the overlap of states that restrict voting, deny LGBTQ+ rights and ban abortions, she reminded attendees: "It's all about the dignity of all people." With some progressives tempted to squabble among themselves, just five months before the election, her message was timely, including a warning that "all of the residual effects [of *Dobbs*] are yet to be found." Monday, she will be appearing at *Dobbs*-related events in Arizona and Maryland.

Harris's skill in connecting personal experience to the law works well in other contexts, too. At an emotionally charged gathering on Monday, for example, she rolled out a White House initiative to hold accountable combatants using rape as an instrument of war.

Harris presented a commanding figure at a lectern in an Executive Office Building auditorium packed with survivors and activists. There, she balanced empathy ("My heart breaks for the trauma and pain inflicted in each of these conflicts") with a dignified legal presentation that kept the event from turning maudlin or appearing exploitive. She stressed that "sexual violence has been a tactic of war since ancient times ... [as] those who have waged war have specifically targeted and violated women and girls to exert dominance and power over their bodies and to humiliate and terrorize and subdue entire populations."

Reminding the audience of her prosecutorial backstory, she argued that the United States must deploy "all of our diplomatic, financial, and legal tools to punish those who commit sexual violence." She continued, "We must condemn, of course, this conduct. But there must be accountability." Laying out the administration's commitment "to move the system from only condemnation to consequences," she noted that the White House "imposed sanctions based solely on conflict-related sexual violence, including for crimes committed in Haiti, Sudan, Iraq, and the [Democratic Republic of Congo], with the knowledge that meaningful systems of accountability also contribute to deterrence."

She specifically highlighted Hamas's systematic sexual violence against Israeli women. Effectively rebuking months of protests that often devolved into rank antisemitism and denial of Hamas's atrocities, Harris vividly recounted:

In the days after Oct. 7, I saw images of bloodied Israeli women abducted. Then it came to light that Hamas committed rape and gang rape at the Nova Music Festival, and women's bodies were found naked from the waist down, hands tied behind their back, and shot in the head.

She personalized the unimaginable horrors in describing her meeting with a survivor, Amit, "who has bravely come forward with her account of sexual violence while she was held captive by Hamas." (Amit later detailed her ordeal.) Harris then delivered her closing argument: "The use of sexual violence as a tactic of war is unconscionable." (After victims spoke, Sheryl Sandberg presented her horrifying "Screams Before Silence" documentary.)

Political media largely underplays the vice president's role in the campaign and specifically her task in reaching out to critical Democratic constituencies. But her political strength is not lost on the Biden team — as a senior aide exiting the gate on Monday acknowledged to me — which now deploys her during event-packed weeks. This past week alone, Harris's schedule included a quick trip to Switzerland; her Monday event; a gun-safety appearance and Juneteenth celebration in Atlanta; abortion events back in D.C.; and finally, a New York speech to the largest hospitality union.

As is true with the entire campaign, the voters most enthusiastic about Harris are those who are most engaged. Now, the campaign must ensure the entire electorate gets to see what those watching her up close have observed: a formidable candidate.