



Attendees hold signs as President Joe Biden speaks during Day 1 of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago Aug. 19. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Blake)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 21, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The Democratic National Convention, which a few weeks back had all the promise of an Irish wake, has instead demonstrated the remarkable change in the strategic positions of the two parties. The enthusiasm Vice President Kamala Harris is generating makes the Democrats look like they could be winners this November, sparing the nation a return to Trumpism and the existential threat to the constitutional order such a return entails.

Still, for all the excitement, there have been missed opportunities this week that may come to haunt the Democrats in November or later.

The highlight of Monday night's convention was [the speech by President Joe Biden](#). In some sense, the highlight actually preceded the speech, when delegates cheered the president [for a full five minutes](#) before he was able to make himself heard above the chants of "We love Joe."

Not since the 1964 convention, when Robert F. Kennedy took the podium in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and the delegates exploded in a similar manifestation of genuine affection [for a full 22 minutes](#), has there been such a show of emotion at a convention. Biden deserved the tribute, not just for his painful decision to step aside but for the 50 years of service to the party and the nation that preceded it.

Several speakers, including Biden, [Sen. Raphael Warnock](#) and [Rep. Jamie Raskin](#), spoke powerfully about what the country endured on Jan. 6, 2021. Biden spoke about taking office that Jan. 20: "In front of me, in front of me, was a city surrounded by the national guard, behind me a capitol just two weeks before had been overrun by a violent mob."



President Joe Biden pauses as he speaks during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago Aug. 19. (OSV News/Reuters/Craig Hudson)

That inaugural ceremony was, [as I wrote at the time](#), "a powerful moment, a redemptive moment," as the former crime scene was reclaimed as a citadel for democracy.

What is absent from political conventions is often as problematic as what is present. Party conventions have become coronations, a fact that oddly fails to serve the interests of the person being crowned. So, while it is necessary to reintroduce Harris to the American people, to help them grow accustomed to seeing her in the top spot, that isn't enough.

The convention is like soup-making, and the first few days are about making the stock and prepping the ingredients for Thursday night's acceptance speech. Similarly, elections are not just about winning, but winning in such a way that the person chosen to lead the country does so with a mandate to do something.

The greatest failing at the convention so far has been the lack of laying the foundation for a governing agenda, most obviously on the issue of climate change.

The first person to mention it was the first person to speak, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, [who began his invocation](#): "We praise you, O God of all creation. Quicken in us a resolve to protect your handiwork." For the rest of the night, climate change was mentioned only in passing.

What Democrats need to do this week is explain the transition through which they intend to lead the country. For example, how can controversial things like fracking be part of that transition, but only part? Our nation needs a policy that recognizes the complexity of delivering energy, and the need for good paying jobs in the emerging green economy. They need a road map, not just focus group-tested throwaway lines.

[In a powerful section of the evening](#), three women, one accompanied by her husband, spoke about their experiences facing crisis pregnancies and how legal restrictions on abortion complicated their access to emergency care.

Is there no way to craft legislation that deals with these situations that also maintains a limit on late-term abortions? Is there no way to create a culture in our health care industry that recognizes that both patients need care but protecting the life of the mother takes precedence in situations like those described? And while I understand the church's teaching, and believe it, can we all agree that, as a matter of public policy, victims of rape and incest should be permitted to procure an abortion?

Instead of wrestling with these moral realities, the Democrats have adopted a half-truth: You can't tell a woman what to do with her body. It is true that an unborn child is part of a woman's body, but it is also true that it is not like the other parts. It has distinct DNA. Millions of Americans have seen a sonogram of their unborn children or grandchildren.

Are there no limits that seem advisable? *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* both had limits on abortion. Why, now, can we not even discuss that?

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was not in Chicago Monday; he was in Jerusalem, where he met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and got the prime minister to agree to the Biden administration's [cease-fire proposal](#). The proposal has been dubbed a "bridging proposal" that gets the warring parties to the line close to an armistice.

Advertisement

"I'm here as part of an intensive diplomatic effort on President Biden's instructions to try to get this agreement to the line and, ultimately, over the line," [Blinken said](#). "It is time for it to get done."

There were protesters outside the United Center but none of them were protesting Hamas' intransigence. [One protester said](#) he supports Hamas and specifically supported the pogrom on Oct. 7, 2023. He may be an outlier, but the media found him.

Biden, in his speech, said of the protesters that "they have a point," adding, "A lot of innocent people are being killed on both sides."

That is true. It is also true that the moral responsibility for the deaths of civilians in Gaza is at least equally shared by Israel and Hamas. Israel bombs targets they identify as terrorist command centers and hideouts, but it is Hamas that embeds those targets in civilian infrastructure. Will no one say that truth this week?

Still, Biden gets kudos for thinking around the corner about how to get negotiations back on track not just to end the war but to establish some semblance of peace in the region.

I was also surprised there were not more echoes of the themes and policies Harris [outlined in her speech](#) last Friday in North Carolina. If Biden has helped America recover from the economic fallout created by COVID-19, Harris has pointed to the next steps to make sure center-left policies help working- and middle-class families with [what Paul Krugman called](#) "a moderately center-left position, not too different from President Biden's original [Build Back Better](#) agenda."

This has to break through the culture war chatter: Democrats will help cities like Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and Detroit, Michigan, rebuild themselves. Donald Trump only promises to help the fat cats and hope the affluence trickles down, which it never does.

We will see what the last two nights of the convention bring. Tonight, Gov. Tim Walz takes center stage and tomorrow night, Harris brings the convention to a close with her acceptance speech. The Democratic base is reenergized to be sure, and Harris has made serious inroads to [voters previously supporting](#) Robert Kennedy Jr., but the Democrats need to reach voters who are yet undecided.

Those undecided voters have processed Trump's and Biden's tenures. They see the glaring differences. They know what happened on Jan. 6. And they are still undecided. Who knows what moves them? But they are the ones who will yet decide who lives in the White House for the next four years.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)