

[Opinion](#)  
[NCR Voices](#)



Democratic presidential nominee and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris takes the stage during the Democratic National Convention at the United Center in Chicago Aug. 22. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Segar)



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 23, 2024

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

Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz only seemingly had the same task this week. Both had to accept their party's nomination for president and vice president respectively. But, in fact, the tasks were quite different. Harris was reintroducing herself to the American people, which is a far harder thing to do than Walz's task of introducing himself for the first time.

Why is reintroduction harder? It isn't clear. But, in our lifetime, only one sitting vice president has won the White House at the ballot box, George H.W. Bush in 1988.

Joe Biden and Richard Nixon had both served as vice president, but did not ascend to the top spot directly: Biden was on the sidelines for four years and Nixon for eight. Gerald Ford was never elected. Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman, Calvin Coolidge and Theodore Roosevelt all entered the White House upon the death of their predecessor.

You have to go back to [Martin Van Buren in 1836](#) to get to another sitting vice president who won the presidency.

The circumstances this year are also unique and, one suspects, will be more determinative than the historical record. Harris is benefiting mightily from something Nikki Haley, then a Republican primary candidate, [predicted last January](#): "The first party to retire its 80-year-old candidate is going to be the party that wins this election." And the entire Democratic National Convention this week was one continued attempt to ride the wave of enthusiasm generated by [Biden's decision to pass the torch](#).

In the television age, the most likely challenge for a sitting vice president is simple: It is difficult to project leadership when you are always just behind the incumbent, a couple of steps back, as Prince Phillip was always just behind Queen Elizabeth. Biden was the one at the microphone. Harris was always standing just behind him.

Advertisement

Harris' acceptance speech Aug. 22 was a master class in how to weave a biographical narrative and the moral lessons she drew from her childhood and career with a political vision for the country. Stories about her immigrant mother and the working-class neighborhood in which she grew up gave way to pithy political axioms like "Never complain about injustice; do something about it."

Recounting her time as a prosecutor permitted her to identify her own experience confronting issues that concern Americans, from border security to crime to predatory lending.

The indictment Harris leveled against former President Donald Trump was concise, forceful and comprehensive. Not only did she effectively raise questions about his character, but she used his sabotaging the bipartisan immigration legislation earlier this year to effectively inoculate her on what is a challenging issue for the Democrats.

While I do not agree with her on the issue of abortion, she made her argument with clarity and force.

On foreign policy, Harris was almost surprisingly hawkish, promising to make sure America always possesses "the most lethal force" in the world. She gave a forceful commitment to the defense of Ukraine and Israel while also acknowledging the suffering of civilians in Gaza.

The most consistent word in the speech was "forward." She spoke of the need to "chart a new way forward" and "moving forward" and "not going back." Her evident youthfulness compared to both the incumbent and former presidents who addressed the convention this week reinforced the message.

Most importantly, her speech was more focused and better delivered not only than [Trump's rambling nonsense](#) last month, but better than I have ever seen Harris. The next time there is an event at the White House, and she is still required to stand behind Biden, it will seem strange, odd. Last night, she showed she is ready to be the one at the microphone.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz takes the stage during the Democratic National Convention at the United Center in Chicago Aug. 21. (OSV News/Reuters/Brendan Mcdermid)

[Walz's acceptance speech](#) on Wednesday night lacked the rhetorical flourishes of great oratory. One line jumped out as especially well-crafted: "So, while other states were banning books from their schools, we were banishing hunger from ours."

His line "mind your own damn business" is not the start of a primer in solidarity, but it recognizes a concern for privacy that is real and legitimate.

There is nothing historical about a Midwestern white governor running for national office, although he might be seen as the ultimate DEI hire of this election cycle. He pointed to some accomplishments as governor, such as getting paid family leave enacted into law. None of that mattered.

What mattered was the burly [former football players](#) he coached lining the stage. What mattered was [his son, Gus](#), stealing the show as he freely showed his emotions when his dad spoke about how he loved his family.

It has become a commonplace to call Walz an "everyman" but that really does describe him. You would want your kids to have a teacher or coach like him. And the fact that he has such an obvious and easy rapport with the more glamorous and polished Harris is a special kind of endorsement. Democrats like to stack their campaigns with celebrities, but Walz is a kind of anti-celebrity, and that will help the campaign also.

It is hard to think how the Democratic convention could have gone better for the party. They appeared energized and mostly unified. They projected confidence not just about their chances in November but for the future of the country. The chants of "USA!" reminded Republicans that no party has a monopoly on love of country. And, in Harris and Walz, they have a ticket that is easy to disagree with on this issue or that, but that is difficult to dislike or dismiss.

This election will be close because the country is so evenly divided. It may well be decided by something that has not yet happened, like an especially good or bad debate performance. (Ask Biden.) The unexpected proverbial banana peel will cause one or all of the candidates to slip up and how they recover may make the difference. But there is no denying the Democrats helped themselves this week.

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