



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Is the US a racist misogynist country? A handful of voters will decide



US voters relieved that the central theme of this year's presidential election campaign has shifted away from age might blanch at the alternatives that are quickly taking its place: racism and misogyny.

Selecting Kamala Harris is now all but a **formality** at the Democrats' upcoming Chicago convention. But the party and her campaign would do well to ask themselves this in itself already innately racist and misogynist question: Can a woman of colour beat an old white man for the top job in the US?

The question should never come up; race, gender, religion, none of that should matter and we're the worse for even contemplating such factors.

Certainly, Harris should not be judged on them. If anything, her rather thin stint in the Senate and her underwhelming performance as vice-president should be the focus of critical examination ahead of her candidacy.

And yet, it would be foolish for the Democrats to ignore what will become the central focus of the election, certainly if it's up to legions of Trump-Vance supporters and apparently also the Republican campaign.

From pointing out that she has no biological children to questioning her bona fides as a natural-born US citizen, in an echo of the Barack Obama birther conspiracy theory, the **smear campaign** has already kicked into high gear.

A delicate balance

Obama triumphed in 2008, in a wildly different political landscape, with a message of hope. And judging by the first few days of her as yet not-formalised candidacy, Harris is trying to use the momentum of relief among the Democratic base to recreate some of that enthusiasm and also appeal to younger voters.

But it's a delicate balance as she also needs to remind the electorate of the stakes in this election and the risks of a revanchist Trump

presidency.

It's something of a truism to say that political campaigns fare better when they run on hope rather than fear. Obama's 'Yes, we can', Reagan's 'It's morning again in America' and even Trump's 'Make America great again', all ostensibly appeal to voters' optimism rather than their fears.

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But often, and certainly when it comes to Trump and other right-wing candidates, a more negative, fear-mongering message does the heavy lifting.

During the Cold War this was the spectre of communism, today it's demonised 'hordes of migrants', not just stealing jobs, homes and services but now also turned into murderers and rapists by the campaign rhetoric.

The xenophobia of the Trump-Vance platform and polemics melds seamlessly with the racism directed at the presumptive candidate. And so does the misogyny that is part and parcel of both Trump's and Vance's political outlook.

Unfair question

Hillary Clinton's "Stick it to the man by voting for a woman" was an abject failure in 2016. But arguably, her baggage as well as the backlash against America's first president of colour, would have doomed almost any strategy.

Trump was forgiven even by his female base for his disgraceful behaviour and language towards women. And Clinton did not get enough support from her own progressive base, including women.

The question is whether this equation has shifted in the light of the Supreme Court Roe

v. Wade abortion decision and Trump picking a running mate in J. D. Vance who seems to have stepped straight out of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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Harris will hope that this contest is a re-run of 2008, not 2016. But in a way the questions that many thought had been answered by the election of Obama and the failure of Hillary Clinton, are now on the ballot again: Is America a racist and misogynist country?

The question might not be a fair one, whole countries and societies should not be judged as one. But the answer will inevitably affect the country's self-image and its standing abroad.

Xenophobia as such might not be an obvious factor in many socio-political questions. But when weaponised by populist politicians or demagogues, it comes all too readily to the fore, and not just in the US.

Another 'project fear'

While reporting in the run-up to the UK leaving the EU, I found that at the very least group-think and othering of migrants, scapegoating them for problems that successive governments had left unattended, was more often than not hovering underneath the Leave vote, if not right at the surface.

The Brexit campaign is in some ways an appropriate parallel. The Leave camp engaged openly in fearmongering with warnings of an EU-enabled influx of non-western migrants.

Yet, it also accused the Remain camp of running 'project fear' with its warnings of the cost of Brexit, economic and otherwise, that in retrospect are now largely becoming a reality.

The Democrats' warnings of Trump's authoritarian agenda, his love-affairs with dictators and strongmen around the world, his

draconian attitude towards migrants and women, will be dismissed as another 'project fear'.



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Making a positive case for a new Democratic president, as well as majorities in the House and Senate, will be crucial in overcoming such gaslighting. Just as a vigorous defence of the EU by both major UK parties might have made all the difference in the Brexit referendum.

Joe Biden was no longer able to make that positive case credibly, or at least, successfully. Harris has started out by trying to remedy this.

At the very least, she will have to galvanise her own base, including minorities and women, in order to stand any chance of winning.

In the end, American elections are not won by the popular vote but in the Electoral College, and this time many predictions say it could come down to several handfuls of voters in three or four swing states.

Many voters in post-industrial rust-belt areas and other places hard-hit by economic issues such as inflation show the same readiness to blame migrants for their troubles as was apparent in the UK during the Brexit campaign.

They either stayed home or abandoned the Democratic party under Hillary Clinton and only showed up again to vote for an old white male Democrat, Joe Biden, who promised to 'Build back better'.

This mixed record shows that while it will be an uphill struggle for Harris, it's not a foregone conclusion. A positive message and a sympathetic ear could go a long way yet.

For those few thousand hard put-upon swing-state floating voters, though, it's a heavy burden, to determine the future image of the whole United States of America, and possibly also its viability as a democracy.