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THE CURRENT: What does VP pick Kamala Harris bring to the Democratic ticket?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Former vice president and a Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden announced that Kamala Harris, the U.S. senator from California and former presidential candidate herself, will be joining the presidential ticket this November as his vice president. Senator Harris is the third woman and the first Black woman, the first Asian American woman, to appear on a major party's presidential ticket as the vice president. With us to discuss the significance of this pick is Camille Busette, a senior fellow and director of the Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative here at Brookings. Camille, thanks for talking to us today.

BUSETTE: Great to be here. Thank you.

PITA: I wanted to ask you to start off with, it seemed anytime you talked to anyone over the last several months about who the vice presidential candidate might be, everyone said Biden has to pick a Black woman. Tell us about what are the currents that are leading to this. Is this about the overdue recognition for the role that Black women have played in Democratic and progressive politics for years? Is this about the timing of 2020 seeming to be America's year of racial reckoning? Why was that so important?

BUSETTE: Well, you know, I think it's actually both. It is obviously an extraordinary year in so many ways and one I'm sure we hope you will not repeat in the future, but it certainly is a moment of racial reckoning. We have a moment where I think there's an overall acknowledgement across America that we have very different Americas, that Black Americans experience a different kind of life than white Americans. And I think that that is broadly acknowledged; many, many polls show that, and that is across the political spectrum.

But in addition, it's very clear that Black women have been the savior in some ways of the Democratic Party. They are probably the most loyal constituency for the Democratic Party and have been for decades. And when you look at the Alabama race where Doug Jones prevailed in the special election, it was Black women who brought out that vote. So, I think that there are many current as well as previous examples where you see Black women bringing the party to a point of being very successful in some very tight races and, in general, being extremely loyal.

So, picking Kamala Harris as an African American, biracial African American woman is a nod and an acknowledgement of how much the Democratic Party really values the participation and the loyalty of Black women. But beyond that, Kamala Harris is just so, so much more than, you know, a token. If you look at the entire field of presidential VP contenders, you'll see a whole slate of women of color who were incredibly credentialed, and among those she is certainly one of the most credentialed and also one of the most seasoned.

PITA: Yes, that was going to be my next question is that, you know, beyond who Senator Harris represents, what does she bring to the ticket in and of herself, both personality and her policy background?

Busette: So, you know, I think that's a great question. You know her personality, I think has been remarked upon considerably and all I will add to that is that she's very energetic, very charismatic, and very warm in addition to being, you know, incredibly sharp and intelligent. While I don't think that in any way, you know, is an addition to the ticket because the top of the ticket is as well -- Joe Biden shares those personal characteristics -- I think what it does, though, is those characteristics amplify the degree to which the ticket is really focused on connecting with average Americans. And so, I think with her energy and her empathy and her warmth I think there will be a lot of connections. And I think she does really well on the on you know, Zoom platform or remote platform, which is how the campaign is mostly going to be run this year.

Beyond that, in terms of her policy credentials, this is a woman who brings very, very strong policy credentials. She, as we all know, has a very deep law enforcement background, serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Intelligence Committee. She's very well studied and during her time in the Senate has broadened her policy portfolio considerably. So, when you think about somebody who is ready to step in on day one, I don't think Vice President Biden could have selected a better running mate. She would definitely be ready, both from a policy perspective, and then also, from the perspective of understanding how governance works at the federal level.

PITA: There have been some concerns about her background in law enforcement and how that will play, particularly with Black Americans, during a year in which racial discrimination in the criminal justice field is very much front and center of the discussion.

BUSETTE: Yeah, so I you know this is, I think this is an area where she just needs to be very clear about her views and her actions in the context in which they were taken. So, for instance, there's a lot of discussion about how she did not press for the death penalty when a police officer was killed in San Francisco. I lived in San Francisco during that period. And I can just say that pressing for the death penalty in and of itself would have been considered so out of alignment with the way San Franciscans really think about law and order. They really think about death penalty as being something that is very anachronistic and barbaric. And so where she you know really stepped in, I can say, in some ways, she really showed a lot of courage. With respect to her background as a prosecutor, where she obviously you know prosecuted, people of color because there you know plenty of people of color who are obviously interacting with the criminal justice system, given the systemic racism that we are all aware of, she does have to say, I think pretty openly, that as a prosecutor she saw her job as being in charge of law and order and prosecuting the cases that came to her. She can also say that her views have evolved on that and that it's now quite common for prosecutors to be, you know, very forward thinking and racial justice advocates and to really look at the cases that are brought before them. But that was not the context then, and I'm sure she can develop a rapport with voters who feel that that's her weak area by explaining that for thinking has changed, much in the way other candidates have talked about their evolving views on marriage equality.

PITA: There's a long-standing adage in politics that while making a bad choice of a running mate might cost presidential candidates some votes, that no one actually goes out and votes for the vice presidential candidate. And unfortunately, I'm sure that we can say quite safely expect some very ugly moments of misogyny - the uniquely toxic blend of racism and sexism in that Black women are subjected to -- to come up during the campaign. What's your read at this time in terms of how the electorate is likely to respond to Senator Harris?

BUSETTE: So, you know, I think the wisdom that people vote for the top of the ticket remains, and Joe Biden is obviously at the moment polling extremely well compared to President Trump. I do think, however, that when people look at the overall ticket -- so in this case, Trump and Pence versus Biden and

Harris -- they do make assessments about the ticket's ability to generate energy and to generate enthusiasm. And while they are not voting specifically for the vice president, the vice president can either amplify the position that the top of the ticket already holds in the voters' minds or the person can detract from that. And I think in this case, Senator Harris definitely amplifies the reputation that Vice President Biden already has with voters.

PITA: And looking forward to the future, Biden has spoken of himself as very likely being a transitional president, generating a lot of hopes and expectations about what this could mean not only for Senator Harris's future career herself but also about who she represents as the future of the Democratic Party or the future of politics in America. But there's also something that a history and a pattern that breaking gender or race-based glass ceilings is not always followed by as much progress as one might hope. You and I are both old enough to remember that 1984 was the year of the woman when Mondale pick Ferraro, and then in 92 again, there were a lot of women elected to Congress, but then nothing changed for quite a while after that. Does this time feel different to you? Do you see both Kamala Harris her pick and what's happening in 2020 as signifiers of more lasting change?

BUSETTE: Well, I think that's a really fascinating question and I'm going to answer it in a couple of different ways. I think, first that in terms of the Democratic Party, I think the Democratic Party itself is at an inflection point. And I say that because it really currently is governed at the very top by a very seasoned older generation which is likely to retire, I would say, in the next five to six years. So, there is a handing of the baton and one has to think about what that Democratic Party is going to look like given the demographics of the United States. And I think what Biden is signaling is that he understands those demographic changes. He understands that Kamala Harris with her multiple identities is as representative as you possibly can get of the larger populace in the United States. And so, selecting her gives the Democratic Party an opportunity to seize the future and seize it in a way where voters see themselves reflected.

And that is, I think, in very sharp contrast to the way the Republican Party under the leadership of President Trump has thought about the future. There was a moment when the Republican Party, not too long ago, the Republican Party actually thought about how they were going to broaden their base. With the election of President Trump, I think it's pretty safe to say that that base has actually shrunk. So, they will have a lot of work to do to rebuild the party in the image of the mid-21st century populace in the United States. So that's the first thing.

And then the second thing is in terms of this moment, and whether this moment represents lasting change, we all know that change is something that ebbs and flows and moves in increments and then it sort of seems like you make a couple steps back and I think that that will continue, but I do think that overall the momentum is towards greater change, particularly in the area of racial equity and justice. So I'm hopeful that not only just with Harris, but generally around the national conversation that we are poised to make some really big gains there and then hopefully those will be sustained over time.

PITA: All right, well, Camille, thanks very much for talking to us today.

BUSETTE: My pleasure. Thanks, Adrianna