

Kamala Devi Harris

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In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Kamala Devi Harris was born October 20, 1964, at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, California. Her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, was a cancer researcher from Chennai, India. Her father, Donald Harris, was an economist from Jamaica. Both were doctoral students at UC Berkeley and met in the civil rights organizing of the early 1960s. Kamala and her sister Maya were carried to protests in strollers. After her parents separated, her mother raised her in a Black Berkeley neighborhood and a Black Oakland church.

Work. Howard University for undergrad (1986). UC Hastings College of the Law (1989). Alameda County District Attorney's Office. San Francisco District Attorney (2004-2011). 32nd California Attorney General (2011-2017). United States Senator from California (2017-2021). 49th Vice President of the United States (2021-2025). 2024 Democratic presidential nominee after President Biden's late withdrawal.

Impact. As California AG she won a \$25 billion national mortgage settlement for California homeowners after the 2008 crisis. As Senator she built a record on the Judiciary Committee through her questioning of Jeff Sessions, Brett Kavanaugh, and William Barr. As Vice President she cast thirty-three tie-breaking votes in the Senate, the most of any Vice President in history, including the deciding votes on the American Rescue Plan and the Inflation Reduction Act.

Legacy. Howard University enrollment applications spiked after her 2020 election. The Vanity Fair cover photograph by Tyler Mitchell put a Black woman in the formal portrait history of the office. Her Supreme Court confirmation-hearing questions have been added to law school teaching syllabi. She remains a sitting figure in Democratic politics after her 2024 campaign.

The Network

Shyamala Gopalan

Mother. Indian-born biochemist and cancer researcher at UC Berkeley, arrived alone at nineteen on a graduate scholarship. Raised both daughters as a single mother in the Black community of Berkeley and Oakland after the divorce in 1972.

Donald J. Harris

Father. Jamaican-born economist at Stanford University, where in 1972 he became the first Black economist granted tenure. His scholarly work on economic growth and inequality shaped the Harris children's political formation in their Berkeley childhood.

Maya Harris

Sister. Policy attorney and civil rights advocate. Stanford Law graduate. Former dean of Lincoln Law School of San Jose at twenty-nine, at the time the youngest dean of an accredited U.S. law school. Chair of her 2020 presidential campaign and senior policy advisor on her 2024 campaign.

Doug Emhoff

Husband. Entertainment and litigation attorney, former partner at DLA Piper. First Second Gentleman of the United States, 2021 to 2025. Led the White House's work combating antisemitism during the Vice Presidential term.

For Discussion

1. Harris cast thirty-three tie-breaking votes in the U.S. Senate, the most by any Vice President in American history. What does that record tell you about the composition of the 117th and 118th Congresses she served through, and what does it teach about the role of a Vice President whose party holds an exact fifty-fifty Senate?
2. As California Attorney General in 2011, Harris walked away from a proposed four-billion-dollar national mortgage settlement and returned months later with a settlement worth roughly twenty-five billion. What negotiating leverage does a single state attorney general hold inside a multi-party national settlement, and under what conditions does walking away strengthen the subsequent deal?
3. Howard University's undergraduate applications surged in 2020 and 2021 in the wake of Harris's election to the Vice Presidency. What is the specific mechanism by which an individual Black woman's public elevation translates into enrollment at one particular historically Black university, and where else has that pattern recurred?
4. Harris is the first Vice President whose parents were both doctoral students at UC Berkeley in the early 1960s, an immigrant pairing that produced a biography unfamiliar to most of the electorate. How should a public figure navigate a biography whose components are not yet widely understood even by her own party's base, and where are the limits of biographical explanation in American political life?
5. After Biden's late July 2024 withdrawal, Harris inherited a presidential campaign with 107 days to Election Day. What does the compressed campaign teach about the minimum viable time for a national presidential operation, and which elements of the modern campaign structure proved to be load-bearing and which decorative?

Primary Sources

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2. Harris, Kamala. *Smart on Crime: A Career Prosecutor's Plan to Make Us Safer*. Chronicle Books, 2009.
3. Morain, Dan. *Kamala's Way: An American Life*. Simon & Schuster, 2021.
4. Office of the California Attorney General. Public records and settlement documentation, 2011-2017.



5. U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. Hearing transcripts, 115th through 116th Congress, 2017-2020.

