



Supporters hold signs before Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz arrive for a campaign rally Aug. 7 in Romulus, Michigan. (AP/Carlos Osorio)



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The Democratic Party has marched to the Danube. Huh?

In 1704, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough and commander-in-chief of the Allied armies, [had to choose his battlefield](#). His French opponents had posted strong armies in Flanders, along the Moselle, in Alsace, and even in Bavaria, headed to Vienna. Any of these armies could, on short notice and with shorter lines of communication than the Allies had, combine their forces.

Marlborough marched his army down the Rhine, with a flotilla of boats accompanying them, in case they wished to return to Flanders on the river's fast currents. The French dared not abandon any of their original positions, lest Marlborough strike there. On June 7, at the German town of Wiesloch, Marlborough turned decisively southeast toward the Danube, placing his army between two, now separated French armies, each smaller than his own.

"Thus the tables were completely turned," [writes Marlborough's biographer and descendent, Winston Churchill](#), "and nearly all the strategic advantages the French had enjoyed in the middle of May had been transferred to their opponents by the end of June."

The metaphor only seems like a stretch. There is literally no more proximate political analogy to explain what has transpired in U.S. politics in the past month. Even more recent military metaphors seem less apt.

In the first half of 2023, the outlook for the Democrats looked as bleak as it did for the Allies in the spring of 1704. Inflation was not coming down enough. Interest rates are still high. The war in Gaza was dragging on. In March, President Joe Biden [delivered](#) a fiery State of the Union speech but he was still lagging in the polls. On March 25, Biden's [approval rating](#) snuck above 40%, but the next day it fell back and stayed in the high 30s.

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The administration had an impressive record of legislative achievements, but people didn't feel good about the direction of the country so they were ready for a change, an attitude that always makes it hard for the incumbent party to win.

Then, on June 27, Biden [debated](#) former President Donald Trump. Biden looked confused at times, his voice was weak, he was showing his age badly. His campaign was slow to respond. Pressure built for Biden to step aside, but he appeared to dig in. Democrats had the sensation they were ascending a scaffold.

Republicans held their convention feeling heady about their chances in November. The American people wanted change and they were promising it. They even claimed they would seek to unite the country.

Then Trump [chose Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance](#) as his running mate and, during his acceptance speech, abandoned the unifying words on the teleprompter to [ad lib his grievances from the past](#). Trump reminded the American people, those who like him and those who don't, just how enervating he is.

The following Sunday, [Biden dropped out of the race](#).

We are now three months away from the election and the Democrats have turned the tables. Vice President Kamala Harris was able to unite the party quickly behind her candidacy as doubts derived from her [lackluster campaign in 2019](#) were replaced by evidence of a new, more self-confident Harris on the stump. In choosing Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, she [selected a running mate](#) who appears to alienate no one in the party either.

Harris ignited Democratic Party [fundraising efforts](#), hauling in over \$310 million since Biden dropped out. She has caught up in the polls and, according to the latest [fivethirtyeight.com average](#), Harris is slightly ahead of Trump.

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It is now the Democrats who appear as the vehicle for change. Nikki Haley's [January jibe at Trump](#) — "The first party to retire its 80-year-old candidate is going to be the

party that wins this election" — now has the flavor of a premonition. The election is no longer a referendum on Biden. That has been replaced by a new narrative about passing the torch to a new generation.

This change in narrative is more consequential than merely the exhilarating sense among Democrats that the scaffold they were climbing has been swept away. Undecided voters, by definition, are not moved by particular issues on which the differences between the two parties are already well-known. They respond to metaphors like passing the torch, or to attitudinal appraisals, for example, who would you rather have a beer with?

Most importantly, passing the torch is a forward-looking metaphor. Harris is not stuck, as Biden was, getting defensive about the administration's record. She can promise and mix elements of continuity and newness in her pitch.

In the first few days after Biden dropped out, it was the GOP that found itself looking backwards, as Fox News [repeatedly asked](#) what Harris knew about Biden's cognitive decline, an issue that was not only backward-looking but moot.

Harris is still introducing herself to the country and important questions need to be answered. She may have had [great weeks on social media](#) but elections take place in real places, not on TikTok. Harris and Walz not only need to win the Philadelphia suburbs, and win big, they need to not lose Latrobe or Johnstown by too much. We'll look at some of the hurdles both presidential candidates face on Monday.

When Marlborough reached the Danube in 1704, he still had to fight and win the battle. On Aug. 13, at Blenheim, he did just that, routing the French army and changing the scales of power between France and the rest of Europe in ways that lasted until the French Revolution.

Harris and Walz have rescued the Democratic Party from a desperate situation. They now must win the battle against Trump and Vance.

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