

THE HILL

Why Kamala Harris needs a ‘competent’ white man to win

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Illustration / Courtney Jones; Rachel Wisniewski, Allison Joyce, Kenny Holston and Al Drago
Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, Vice President Harris and Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly.

When President Biden passed the torch to Kamala Harris last Wednesday in his nationwide address, he endorsed his vice president for his party's nomination using

three important words: Experienced. Tough. Capable.

These are exactly the words Harris needs to be said about her if she is to successfully navigate a perilous gender labyrinth called the “warmth-competence” matrix. And surviving this matrix is why nearly all Harris’s potential VP picks have one thing in common: they are white men who exude competence.

Landmark studies by Princeton University psychology professor Susan Fiske and other behavioral psychologists find women are held to a double standard on two metrics: warmth and competence. Fiske and Harvard psychology professor Mina Cikara call it “ambivalent sexism.” In one study, researchers at the University of Michigan and Carnegie Mellon University found women lose “status” when they network, viewed as overly “dominant and ambitious.”

The “warmth-competence” effect is already apparent for Harris, who has a trifecta of hurdles ahead of her as a Black and South Asian woman.

Researchers Maya Godbole, Noelle Malvar and Virginia Valian found in a survey on more than 60 traits that can be classified as masculine, feminine or neutral that Donald Trump was rated as “highly masculine” and “not at all feminine,” which, as a male candidate, helped him with voters. But women vying for office must survive a “likability trap,” the researchers wrote, wherein the candidate must exemplify feminine traits while showing strong leadership qualities traditionally thought of as masculine.

2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was “penalized” in her race for president because she “lacked femininity” and her “seeming lack of warmth violated expectations for her gender.” Harris, by comparison, “struck the almost impossible balance between masculinity and femininity” in 2020, giving her a higher rating than Clinton.

The researchers qualified their findings in two ways: first, they posited that the “shift in [Harris’s] favorability once she became a vice presidential candidate may have been partially due to her now subordinate position, a position women ‘should’ occupy,” whereas Clinton was competing at the top of her ticket.

Secondly, citing research that supported their hypothesis that Clinton and Harris may not have been “held to the same femininity standards,” the authors said that for Harris “to smile and respond warmly — challenging stereotypes of Black women as aggressive — might make her femininity more striking than it might be coming from a white woman.”

Now, less than a week after getting her party’s prospective nod, Trump and his fellow Republicans have already amped up the MAGA megaphone, skewering Harris as incompetent in crude, racist and misogynistic terms.

On Sunday, former Trump administration official Sebastian Gorka said Harris “cackles like an insane woman.” Monday morning, Tennessee Republican Rep. Tim Burchett called Harris a “DEI vice president.” The next day, Trump attacked Harris at a rally in Charlotte, N.C., calling her “lyin’ Kamala Harris” and a “radical left lunatic.”

Harris, strategically, has curated an abundance of warmth, making her the star of numerous viral videos, including the now infamous “coconut tree.” She has leaned into her love for cooking, making masala dosa, a food of southern India, in a video with actress Mindy Kaling. And she addressed the issue of her “cackles” in an interview with actress Drew Barrymore, saying, “I have my mother’s laugh” and declaring she would never quietly simmer. “I’m not that person,” she said, telling youth: “Don’t be confined to other people’s perception ... about how you should act in order to be.”

Sound (and warm) advice. However, as studies show, it’s difficult for Harris to fix the perception that she lacks “competence” though she is clearly an accomplished

candidate, with her background as a senator and state attorney general.

Behavioral scientist Christopher Graves says the “zero-sum game” of the warmth-competence effect is “terribly unfair” to women. Still, he says, Harris may be able to thread the needle because of the “differential effect” of her audience segments.

“She should own that tough prosecutor image if she intends to counter the strongman/authoritarian role Trump plays,” says Graves, “but her team should fire up the more fun social media portrayals that clearly come from adoring youth. She owns competence while they portray her likability.”

Harris’s running mate will matter here. Of the various battleground candidates reportedly under consideration, Harris must pick a vice president who exudes authority and competence to offset her perceived weakness: a policy nerd like Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania; a seasoned political veteran like North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper (who just stepped out of the competition); or Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, a former astronaut.

It’s difficult to say that a seasoned politician like Harris needs a man to offset her perceived weakness. But in her journey to the top of the ticket, Harris has had a powerful mentor: Biden. He channeled “warmth” and “competence” through most of his career and now shields her “competence” with his endorsement.

Now, Harris must find her successor: a man who will traverse the treacherous labyrinth that working women encounter and help her win the most powerful post on the planet.