

Democrats start to hit the panic button

Amie Parnes •

Democrats' nerves are at an all-time high. Two months ago — even a month ago — they were feeling bullish about Vice President Harris's prospects of defeating former President Trump. But now, with less than a month to go until Election Day, **they're increasingly worried about a number of issues plaguing the Democratic nominee's campaign.**

On Tuesday, there was grumbling from some Democrats about the vice president's **interview on CBS's "60 Minutes."** There's also concern on everything from the **static poll numbers** in the race to the vice president's messaging and even her standing with men — not just white men but Black and Hispanic men, too. Some of this perhaps can just be chalked up to normal Democratic nerves ahead of what looks like it could be among the closest presidential elections in history. Either way, **it's nerve-wracking for Democrats.** *"Everything is deadlocked and the composition of the electorate is unknowable, and there are so many things that are unprecedented,"* said Democratic strategist Jamal Simmons, who served as Harris's communications director until last year.

"We can't look back with any level of security because we haven't had an African American woman on the ticket. We haven't had a former president running again. We haven't had a campaign with two assassination attempts. We haven't switched out a candidate two months before Election Day before." *"So it's just hard to know,"* Simmons explained. *"If you're not nervous, you're not paying attention."*

Democratic strategist Anthony Coley, who served in the Biden administration, acknowledged the trepidation, pointing to the **stagnant poll numbers in the weeks following the Democratic National Convention,** when Democrats were making comparisons between Harris's campaign and former President Obama's run in 2008. *"Now that the sugar high is gone people have realized what Kamala Harris has said from the start, which is that she is the underdog,"* Coley said. ***This is going to be a fight. ... These numbers are just so stubborn.***

To be sure, there was good news for Democrats on multiple fronts in recent days.

For starters, Harris benefited on the economic front following news of a robust jobs report last week. Inflation — which has been a major source of anxiety for Democrats — has also slowed. A port strike threatening to hamper the economy was suspended.

A string of new polls also shows Harris with a lead.

- A New York Times/Siena College poll on Tuesday, for example, found Harris ahead of Trump nationally, with 49 percent support to his 46 percent, in a head-to-head match-up among likely voters.
- A Reuters-Ipsos survey also showed Harris with a 3-point edge — 46 percent to 43 percent — over Trump.

But the polls in the battleground states are tighter. The Hill/Decision Desk HQ polling average for swing states shows that no one has a lead of even a single percentage point in the nation's seven key swing states.

Democrats are the first to acknowledge that they have walked around ***in a perpetual state of fear*** since the 2016 presidential race, when Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in a surprise victory. Since then, they have vowed to keep the former president from returning to the Oval Office, a major reason why President Biden was pressured out for Harris in July.

"We are Democrats. We are professionally nervous," said Democratic strategist Tim Hogan. Still, Hogan said the campaign has *"found solid footing in organizing, fundraising and messaging."* *"There's confidence, but it's measured because the stakes are so high,"* Hogan added. *"For the next four weeks, it's about channeling that energy in productive ways: getting everyone on the doors and phones to turn out the vote."*

Asked about the state of the race, one major Democratic donor dubbed it a "flip of the coin."

"I feel better than I did last week, but it still doesn't feel great," the donor said. ***I have a pit in my stomach.*** The donor attributed the feeling to several things but mostly pointed to one major flaw: **Harris's economic message wasn't resonating.** *"And the economy is issues number 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5,"* the donor said.

For weeks, Harris has been criticized by Republicans for not doing interviews, an attack that became part of Trump's talking points at rallies and in his own sit-downs with conservative media. But in recent days, she has embarked on a media blitz. This week — after largely shunning journalists, talk show hosts and podcasters since becoming the Democratic nominee — the vice president appeared on CBS's "60 Minutes," Howard Stern's show on SiriusXM, "Late Night with Stephen Colbert" and even the popular women's podcast "Call Her Daddy." Last week, Harris appeared on "All the Smoke," a podcast hosted by two former NBA players, where she talked about issues including legalizing marijuana and even Trump's comments on her racial identity.

The rash of interviews is part of a strategy aimed at *speaking directly to much-needed voting blocs* who are still undecided — including Black and Hispanic voters.

While Democrats said they were pleased to see Harris on a whirlwind media tour, they also ***criticized her messaging on key issues including the economy and immigration.***

In the "60 Minutes" interview, one Democratic strategist praised her comments on owning and shooting a gun, which they said would appeal to moderates who are tired of Trump. But at the same time Harris's comments largely fell flat, the strategist said.

*"She is still fine-tuning her message 28 days out, and I'm sorry, we are in the make-the-sale phase of the campaign now, **we're not still tweaking the message,**"* the strategist said.

One Democratic consultant worried that while Harris's campaign is "doing all the right things" on fundraising, on their field operation, and even paid media, **"it may not be enough"** for the vice president. *"We all knew this would be hard,"* the consultant said. ***"It's going to come down to the wire. No one knows how this will end. That's almost the scariest part."***