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„Kamala Harris: A Woman a Heartbeat Away From the Presidency?“

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Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to this week’s episode of the HCA podcast, my name is Anja Schüler. The presidential elections in the U.S. are less than three weeks away. Today, we’ll be taking a closer look at the vice presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, Kamala Harris. I will be talking to Manisha Sinha, the Draper Chair in American History at the University of Connecticut. Her most recent book, *The Slaves Cause: A History of Abolition*, won the 2017 Frederick Douglass Book Prize. We had the honor to welcome her at the HCA a couple of times. A few years back, she helped us launch the James W.S. Pennington Award, which pays tribute to a former slave who in 1849 received an honorary doctorate from the University of Heidelberg. So welcome to the podcast. It’s really a great pleasure having you today.

Manisha Sinha: Thank you for having me on.

Anja Schüler: Many of our listeners paid close attention to the vice presidential debate last week. How do you think Kamala Harris emerged from that contest?

Manisha Sinha: I think she did rather well, despite the constant interruptions by Mike Pence, which was not to the degree that Trump had interrupted Joe Biden. He did this in his own passive aggressive way, interrupting her constantly, not letting her speak many times, and the moderator was unable to discipline him. And that was unfortunate. So besides that glitch, I think she held her own. She certainly appeared more focused on policy and more charismatic than Mike Pence, who unfortunately also had a fly that landed on his head. And that became the talk of the debate as things go in the United States.

Anja Schüler: But many commentators noted that the debate was civilized and that the participants, for the most part, allowed each other to finish. I think that really tells us a lot about the state of American democratic culture at this point.

Manisha Sinha: Yes. You know, well, Trump has broken all norms. He does not even subscribe to the basic rules of democracy. He has indicated that he would not leave office if he is defeated or he would not accept the results of an election, which is unprecedented, given those kinds of very authoritarian quotes from him, his constant misbehavior at the presidential debate. It seemed in character, to tell you the truth as far as he goes. He did not take it seriously. He lied constantly, interrupted, he tried to bully Joe Biden and luckily was unsuccessful in doing that. I think the vice presidential debates were a little more civilized, but I think people forget that underneath that sort of veneer of sameness Mike Pence also interrupted Kamala Harris several times and went over his two minute length as much as he could. So he was not following the rules. He just appeared more civilized because of Trump's egregiousness.

Anja Schüler: So the American electorate certainly now knows a little more about Kamala Harris than before the debate. I don't think she is that familiar yet to most of our German listeners. What do we need to know about her?

Manisha Sinha: Yes, so Kamala Harris is only the second black woman to be ever elected to the Senate, and I don't know if your German audience would know that being a senator in the United States is really a big deal. Each state has two senators who are representatives of the state in Congress. It's a bigger deal than being even a congressman, a representative from a state which is decided, according to the population, because as a senator you have this role of advise and consent to the executive, meaning all presidential appointments or presidential actions have to be approved by the Senate. So it carries a lot of authority. And so Harris' election was pretty historic because the last person who was a black woman who was elected to the U.S. Senate was a long time ago, decades ago. So it's a very hard ceiling to crack for most women and certainly for most women of color. And her being elected from California after being the first black woman to be elected attorney general of California... That's the highest law enforcement office in the state of California, which, as you know, is bigger in terms of land, size, and population than most countries in the world. So it was a big leap. And it was when she got introduced to the national stage by that election. And then in the Senate itself, she has been quite

prominent in all the hearings that have been held. People have really admired her prosecutorial style that she brought to the hearings of the Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh, and even hearings of Trump administration officials like the former attorney general, Jeff Sessions. Many of her styles of questioning which really try to expose some of the lies that were being told by these officials went viral in the United States. I think she acquired a national political reputation by just being elected to the Senate and performing her duties as the senator from California. And then, of course, she ran for the presidency, which was very ambitious, a lot like Barack Obama, who was elected to the Senate and ran immediately for the presidency. So it shows a certain amount of gumption and ambition on her part. To that, she went from being the district attorney to attorney general, to a senator running for the presidency, and then the vice presidential nomination in such a short amount of period.

Anja Schüler: That's a steep career. What do we need to know about our politics?

Manisha Sinha: Kamala Harris, I think, represents the Democratic Party quite well, both in terms of who she is – the Democratic coalition is a very diverse, multicultural coalition – but also in terms of her politics, which can go anywhere from left to center. On certain issues she seems more centrist, more centrist-liberal. On other issues, she appears more what we in America call more liberal, but what for most Germans would be social-democratic. She is a sponsor of the Green New Deal and wants really strong change in terms of containing climate change and environmental reform. She is a believer in the state regulating the environment, regulating businesses, bad actors. She has done that in her career. So she moves from social democratic to more centrist positions when it comes to certain law enforcement issues. I think it's difficult to pin her down politically, even though her opponents and certainly the Republican Party today are trying to portray her as a socialist, even a communist, because in America, when they say socialist they go back to the Cold War days, they are really talking about people behind the Iron Curtain. So it's a bit of a ridiculous political tactic. But I do think that she definitely is in the liberal-central wing of the Democratic Party. And that's the coalition that forms the Democratic Party today.

Anja Schüler: We heard all summer that Joe Biden would pick a woman of color as a

running mate. Why do you think he and his team chose Kamala Harris? I mean, there were other pretenders. What does she bring to the ticket?

Manisha Sinha: That's a very good question, because you had some really talented black women, somebody like Susan Rice, who had served in the Obama administration; Val Demings, who is a representative from Florida, who had been prominent in the impeachment trial of Donald Trump. I think Joe Biden chose Kamala Harris, and this bodes well for his administration if he gets elected, and I think it was a very good decision. I think he chose her because she has shown that she can run for statewide and national electoral office and hold her own and win. And then she has been sort of path breaking in many of the elections that she has won, and she was a good fundraiser. She did very, very well in the debates, sometimes at his expense. And I think it really does show said broadmindedness on his part that he picked her because he had some of his toughest moments in the presidential primary debates against her.

Anja Schüler: True. So currently, the Biden Harris ticket has quite a comfortable lead in the polls. So let's suppose Joe Biden will be inaugurated in January. The role of the vice president is usually rather undefined. Might that change if Biden-Harris are elected?

Manisha Sinha: That's a very good point, because usually vice presidents tend to be non-entities. They don't do much except to follow the president in all his policies. But I think what Joe Biden is looking to do, at least from what he said in all the interviews, is that he's going to have to play the role that he played for the Obama administration when he took on many executive functions for the Obama administration, including the economic recovery of the nation, sometimes being his liaison to Congress because he had served in Congress as a senator for a long time. I think you will see Biden handing Harris some real executive responsibilities following the pattern of his vice presidency under President Obama.

Anja Schüler: Then there is the saying that the vice president is a heartbeat away from the presidency. She has to step up if something happens to the president. Now, I can't help wondering whether that saying takes on a special meaning in this year's election.

Joe Biden, like his opponent, by the way, is well into his 70s. And it's really hard for me to imagine that he would run again in four years. So is Kamala Harris just the backup or can we imagine plans for a more orderly transition?

Manisha Sinha: So it is true that if the president for some reason has to resign, which has never happened, but in the United States, being a relatively violent country, there have been so many instances of presidential assassinations where the vice president has to step up and become president, think of JFK, think of Abraham Lincoln. And it's really important then to have a vice president who is capable and who would also carry on the policies on which the president was elected. That did not happen with Abraham Lincoln, one of the worst presidents of the United States became president. And he went back on many of Lincoln's policies. On the other hand, when JFK was assassinated and Lyndon B. Johnson became president, he carried out JFK's civil rights initiative, and in fact, went even further. You know, many of the landmark civil rights laws and voting rights laws were all passed by LBJ besides the Great Society programs, which was extending FDR's social programs. So, yes, I think Biden probably had that in mind. He has always said that he's a transition president. That does not necessarily mean that he won't run for a second term. That is still something that he might do. He is physically in much better shape than Donald Trump who is actually a few years younger than him. So it's difficult to say how long he would be president. But, yes, I think that is definitely a consideration.

Anja Schüler: But he did say that he considers himself as a bridge to the next generation of Democratic leaders. By virtue of being picked as the vice president now, is Kamala Harris somehow emerging among this next generation?

Manisha Sinha: I think she is definitely in the leadership category of the Democratic Party, even if she hadn't been selected as vice president. Remember, when you run for the presidency, you are saying that you're good enough to be president. And all those Democrats who ran for the presidency this year, they have all staked a claim to being the leader of the Democratic Party. So I think Joe Biden is very mindful of that. It's not clear whether she will continue to run. Certainly, I think if she's been vice president, she will get even more national exposure and perhaps it will make her even better prepared to become president. So I wouldn't be surprised if she does run for the

presidency down the road.

Anja Schüler: So you're an Indian American yourself. And after Kamala Harris' nomination, you wrote in an op-ed in *The New York Times* that you experience Biden's vice presidential pick as a personal gift. So what does this candidacy mean for Indian Americans? And, of course, what does it mean for women?

Manisha Sinha: I think it means a lot, just as Barack Obama's election was so historic, and it engendered a huge backlash, too, as you can see with the election of Trump. It was such a turning point in American politics. I think Kamala Harris, firstly being a woman: In Germany, of course, you had Chancellor Merkel for so long, you've been lucky, so having a woman leader is not seen as something unusual. But in the United States, despite the fact that there have been nominees both for the presidency and vice presidency, women have just not been able to crack that political glass ceiling. And unlike in a parliamentary system, as in Germany, being president is so much more powerful in the United States. You know, you can basically make policy on your own and with your administration, rather than being answerable to your party and to the parliament. So it's really important to see Kamala Harris' elevation at that level, it is a very powerful statement. She, of course, is of Indian American and African American descent. I think she carries with her this symbolism of the United States as a country of immigrants. She's the daughter of immigrants and she certainly represents a growing numbers of people of color in this country. There are African-Americans, but there are people from all over the world. In the United States, we have such a diverse population. And in a democracy, they are increasingly making their presence felt. And so I felt particularly touched by her nomination, even though she dropped out of the race quite early. So I ended up voting for my local senator from Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren. But I did feel rather touched by Biden's decision because being an immigrant myself, teaching African American history, her story really resonated with me. And sometimes, you know, you can agree with someone politically or disagree politically, but if you see yourself in them, it resonates in a particular manner. So yes, it really did make a big difference, I think, just having her out there in the national political stage. And I actually wrote that op-ed for *The New York Times* even before Biden announced his decision, anticipating that he might, and I sent it to *The New York Times*, and I said, publish it if you want to if

he selects and if not, you can just trash it. So it happened that he did, in fact, select her, and they decided to run the piece.

Anja Schüler: Great, our listeners will find that piece here

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/opinion/kamala-harris-indian-american.html>.

So do you think that this ticket might succeed in bringing the Obama coalition back together that got Obama elected twice? Women, minorities, white working class?

Manisha Sinha: Absolutely. I do think that it will appeal to all the traditional Democratic constituencies. There's a huge gender gap in the United States between the two parties, Democratic and Republican now, and it's becoming worse. We can see there's a huge racial gap with an overwhelming majority of African Americans and people of color, immigrants. Certainly South Asians tend to vote predominantly Democratic. Even the Jewish population tends to vote predominantly Democratic. Now, the Republicans have made some inroads in all these traditional Democratic constituencies, whether it's white working class, whether it's the Latino population, Jewish or Indian communities. But it's a very narrow base that they have acquired in a more diverse population. So I do think that she represents and the Democratic Party does represent all these constituencies very well. And hopefully it will fire up the Obama base. The problem in 2016 was the perfect storm of bad things happening at the same time, so that even though Hillary Clinton actually won that election by nearly three million votes, because of the way the Electoral College is made up in the United States, she ended up losing the Electoral College by very small margins. And the problem was the base wasn't fired up for her and with a real campaign of disinformation against her. Now, we know that Russian intelligence services were involved in that. The American intelligence services have proved that, and everyone accepts that except the Trump administration. With all those voter suppression tactics too, it handed Trump the presidency in what was really a fluke election. Trump's election was not normal. And most people understand that today. Many decent Republicans watching the way that he has governed, rather not governed at all, completely incompetent and criminally incompetent in dealing with the pandemic, in dealing with all kinds of situations of the United States has to face, have left the Republican Party. So I'm hoping now there's much more enthusiasm for the ticket,

and that people will turn out in bigger numbers. To tell you the truth, I was quite certain that Hillary Clinton would win, and a lot of us maybe were complacent. We voted, but it was one of the lowest turnouts in presidential elections. It was really that the Democratic base did not turn out in the numbers that they ought to have. Everyone just took it for granted that she would win. I think now they realized that even when you're leading the polls by 10 points, you still have to turn out and vote. And that is why I think the Republicans are going to such lengths to make voting in this pandemic particularly difficult.

Anja Schüler: So you are predicting a bigger turnout on November 3, and you are predicting a victory of the Democratic ticket?

Manisha Sinha: I am. I actually am. And the reason why I'm doing that is because the early voting has been unprecedented. It's been millions of people who have voted. And if you look, people are already standing in lines because in certain southern states like Georgia and Texas, they've taken away mailboxes. They have taken away ballot boxes. They've attacked the United States Postal Service so that voting by mail is more difficult. So they've done everything possible. And yet the turnout has been really a lot. So right now, I am optimistic. I am optimistic that they will win many of these swing states. I'm optimistic that they will win. But with Trump, you can never say never. You never know what happens with him. He might do anything. I mean, right now, there was a plot by a right wing, largely neo-Nazi group to kidnap the elected governor of a state and execute her. Really, that's what they wanted to do. And Trump has not condemned that. He sees these people as part of his base now. In Germany, except for the AfD, I don't think any mainstream political party would condone that kind of neo-Nazi reaction, and I think it is so important to defeat Trumpism in particular, because it has also given, you know, encouragement to right wing forces everywhere around the world, including Germany, Spain. All those people are crawling out from under the rocks because they identify with Trump's authoritarianism. And so I think it's really important not just for the United States, but for the world as a whole to completely annihilate Trump. It's dangerous, they are playing with fire, there could be no good outcome if Trump wins because it's going to, again, fuel such people all around the globe. And we cannot have a global order where the United States, which has not only been seen as the shining beacon of

democracy, despite all its flaws, that the United States becomes now authoritarian access with Putin and people like that. So I think people all over the world are watching this election with bated breath because of that.

Anja Schüler: They sure are. I was just going to say we're holding our breath until November 3, we're trying to be a little optimistic about this. And then we might see more of Kamala Harris in 2024 or 2028. So many thanks for those insights, Manisha Sinha. You have been listening to the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, my name is Anja Schüler. And in the coming weeks, our podcast will continue to focus on the presidential elections in the United States, which will be, as Manisha Sinha just said, unusual, in many respects. There is a pandemic, there is a very unorthodox incumbent, a deluge of mail-in ballots, as we have just heard, in combination with a vandalized postal service. Many commentators anticipate that the results might be quite contested, and lawsuits almost certainly loom on the horizon. We'll try to make sense of it all next week with Manfred Berg, Curt Engelhorn Professor for American History here at Heidelberg. So please join us for that. Before I sign off for today I would like to thank my team for its support, and I would like to thank you for listening to the podcast. I look forward to welcoming you back next week. Until then, please stay safe and healthy.