

THERE ARE NO BACKSIES ON DOBBS

Since the day after the debate in June, I have conceived of the shift from a Joe Biden to a Kamala Harris campaign in three ways: The Vice President would more vigorously explain the wildly successful policies of the Biden-Harris Administration. She might (and indeed, has started to) chip away at the Double Hater logjam that has embodied presidential elections since 2016. And she would speak about choice far better than Biden ever could.

At the time, I maintained that Gretchen Whitmer was the only Democrat nationally who speaks better to choice than Harris does. In assuming the presidential ticket, Kamala's team has made abortion something far more. They have made reproductive rights a cornerstone of a revamped democracy agenda.

That has happened in a curious way. Dobbs only happened because the Supreme Court has become a supercharged, wildly undemocratic wing of right wing policy. The fight to get abortion referenda on state ballots has repeatedly, perhaps most notably in Ohio, had to first defeat anti-democratic efforts to disempower referenda generally. In Wisconsin, voters first had to put Janet Protasiewicz on the Supreme Court before they could turn to protecting reproductive choice, but organizing to do that has laid the groundwork for renewed Democratic vitality. To restore reproductive rights, in state after state, democracy must be renewed.

But all that's in the background. Kamala's team has succeeded in making abortion something more: the most obvious item on a laundry list of the ways the far right has tried to take rights (and books) away, a fight for Freedom, one that has enthused millions of younger voters, especially women of child-bearing age.

And so, as I thought it might, Kamala's focus on

choice is one of the things that has remade the race.

It didn't take rocket science to offer that prediction (though surprisingly few pundits did so, and most people pushing for a Thunderdome primary, who were overwhelmingly men, missed it). Democrats have successfully run on choice since Dobbs; it has played a central role in Democratic campaigns even in places like Andy Beshear's Kentucky. Yet Kamala's clarion voice on the issue largely got ignored as people plotted for ways to bypass the first woman Vice President to replace Biden.

Thus far in this campaign, a focus on abortion has also provided a way to make visible the patriarchy presumed in most threads of the right wing coalition backing Trump, especially but by no means exclusively Christian nationalism. Lest voters ever forget, Kamala's campaign keeps rolling out one after another video in which JD Vance demands women get back to the role *his* Church dictates for them: breeding children.

A number of things – the successful convention, a surge in registration among those women of child-bearing age, polls showing that abortion is the most important issue for a larger number of voters – have led horserace journalists to finally cop on.

Or perhaps they're just noting Trump's response to Kamala's focus on choice. I think choice (and the way it harms Trump with women voters) is one reason Trump's team made Tulsi Gabbard a more formal surrogate; in their appearance together in LaCrosse, billed a Town Hall, Tulsi told the story of her own attempt to conceive using IVF, effectively adopting Tim Walz' story and focus. Certainly, it's the reason why, over the course of one day, Trump said wildly contradictory things about choice.

Yesterday, both NYT and WaPo had stories describing the background to that. Trump whisperers Jonathan Swan and Maggie Haberman, who in July first seeded the false narrative

that a GOP platform that enshrines fetal personhood reflects a “softened” stance on abortion, treat it as primarily a matter of messaging.

Back in 2022, the former president had told allies – as the Supreme Court was preparing to overturn *Roe v. Wade* – that the move would hurt his party. Since that year, when Republicans underperformed expectations in the midterm elections, Mr. Trump has been privately emphatic with advisers that in his view the abortion issue alone could kill their chances of victory in November. And he is willing to make as many rhetorical and policy contortions as he deems necessary to win.

It is through that narrow political lens that Mr. Trump has been weighing the subject, despite his role in reshaping the Supreme Court that overturned the landmark 1973 abortion decision.

The results have been confusing and fluid, a contradictory mess of policy statements as he has once again tried to rebrand himself on an issue that many of his supporters view in strict moral terms, and had come to believe that he did, too.

[snip]

Still, even by Mr. Trump’s standards, the past few weeks have been head-spinning for people trying to keep track of his slippery social conservatism.

Twice divorced serial philanderer Donald Trump doesn’t *have* social conservatism. He has a politically expedient con. Trump has convinced Christian nationalists he was anti-choice in public while attempting to limit the political damage of anti-choice policies behind the scenes. And that con is running headlong into the consequences of the actions he took to

sustain the con.

WaPo states this more clearly; this is not about messaging (though WaPo cites Republicans mocking how bad Trump's messaging on it is). It's about Trump's record. Trump had wanted to run on other policies, immigration and Trump's distorted claims about the economy, but now he's having to answer for his anti-choice policies.

Many Republicans are hoping that other topics, like the economy and the border, will take precedence for voters, and they cite polls showing broader voter interest in those issues than in abortion.

Trump campaign spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that women voters will compare the Trump and Biden-Harris administrations, and that under Trump, "the economy was better, groceries and gas cost less, our neighborhoods were safer, and young women like Laken Riley were still alive" – a reference to a Georgia student allegedly killed by someone who entered the country illegally in 2022.

But, as noted, in the month since she has entered the race, Kamala has made abortion the primary issue for more voters than immigration is, and it rivals the economy as the most important election issue among women voters.

Swan and Maggie describe how Trump became what they describe as "agitated" after watching the way the DNC made abortion a primary focus.

In private, Mr. Trump was agitated by the speeches at the Democratic National Convention, according to a person close to him, many of which tied him to Project 2025, an effort by people supportive of Mr. Trump to develop policy proposals for him if he wins that include restrictive ideas for reproductive measures. He was especially

bothered by Ms. Harris's assertions that a second Trump term would further imperil abortion rights.

This is more than agitation.

It is flailing.

Panic.

A recognition that *he is losing* because of actions he took as President, he is losing because of what the payoff he owed to social conservatives who put him in the White House, a far right SCOTUS, did to women. What NYT journalists with another book contract describe as "head-spinning" is not about branding, it's about panic because Kamala threatens to hold him accountable for his actions.

No matter how many contradictory statements Trump makes about what a second Trump term would do, there's no escaping what his first term did do. There are no backsies on Dobbs. There are no backsies on Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. There aren't even any backsies on that platform granting fetuses protection under the 14th Amendment, even if NYT's Trump whisperers continue to pretend that didn't happen.

I mean, *come on!* If not for the three people Trump added to SCOTUS and those, like Clarence Thomas and Sam Alito, paid for by the same far right Christian nationalists that pushed Vance as a candidate, Trump would be sitting in trial for his attack on January 6 as we speak. Trump is only here, in the race, because of those ideologues who were willing to alter the Constitution to serve a far right agenda. Trump has survived thanks to that Court; he is panicking as he considers the possibility it'll sink him as well.

And even as Kamala already has Trump panicking, it could get worse for Trump and his party.

There's something about the WaPo version of this story that I can't get out of my head; it's

actually one of the reasons I went through the trouble of writing this post. Its subhead (presumably not written by the journalists) suggests Trump's wild gyrations on choice come during the "final stretch" of the campaign. "Heading into the campaign's final stretch, Republicans careen between their base and swing voters on the powerful issue of reproductive rights." The temporal observation, that we're in the last stretch, is undoubtedly true viewed through the lens of the traditional interminable US presidential campaign. Labor Day kicks off the last, most intense period of a campaign, though importantly, the period when low-information voters first start to tune in. Given Trump's attempt to stave off criminal charges by announcing his run early, in November 2022, it's far more true of Trump, who is 91% of the way through his run to regain the presidency.

Not so Kamala Harris.

As I calculated Wednesday, Kamala is just starting the second third of her campaign, what we might call her second trimester if it were three times as long. As of today, she has 60% of her campaign, 64 days of 107, left to go.

And so, even as Kamala has already made Trump an equivocating wreck, nine-tenths of the way through *his* campaign and just in time for low-information voters to witness it, she has only just laid a foundation to build on. Even as the press described Trump's flopsweat as abortion threatens to ruin his bid, Kamala's campaign rolled out a bus tour to focus on reproductive rights.

They are, quite literally, taking it to Trump, to Palm Beach, for the kickoff.

Today, Team Harris-Walz is announcing the launch of its "Fighting for Reproductive Freedom" bus tour with a kickoff event in Donald Trump's backyard in Palm Beach, Florida, on Tuesday, September 3. Senator Amy Klobuchar, Harris-Walz campaign manager Julie

Chavez Rodriguez, Republican TV personality Ana Navarro, and reproductive rights storyteller Anya Cook will hold Trump directly accountable for the devastating impacts of overturning Roe v. Wade, including threatening access to IVF.

This fall, the bus will make at least 50 stops in key states, touching blue communities and red ones, with support for reproductive rights transcending party lines. Each stop will emphasize the stark contrast between Vice President Harris and Governor Walz, who will restore the protections of Roe when Congress passes a bill to do so, and Donald Trump and JD Vance, who will enact their dangerous Project 2025 agenda to ban abortion nationwide, restrict access to birth control, create a national anti-abortion coordinator, force states to report on women's miscarriages and abortions, and jeopardize access to IVF.

This is a bus tour of diverse surrogates, not Harris or Walz themselves. The grand-daughter of César Chávez, Julie Chávez Rodriguez, is the only royalty on *this* bus. But the bus provides the campaign a low-effort way to build on the foundation established at the DNC, to try to yoke state referenda more closely to partisan races, to try to make races like that of Florida Senate candidate Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (or that of Angela Alsobrooks or Dan Osborn) more competitive. If that works, who knows how close Kamala might make the Florida race itself? Even assuming Kamala won't beat Trump in his own state, it will serve to reinvigorate a state party that had been struggling, but which also just recently delivered embarrassing defeats to Moms for Liberty, the book-burners who serve as both Ron DeSantis and Trump's surrogates to reach women.

Thus far, horserace journalists have been

absolutely loathe to hold Trump accountable for the bad things that happened when he was President: his failures on COVID as well as jobs lost for reasons other than pandemic, the spike in crime, his corruption of rule of law.

But Kamala has finally made Trump own something, his role in stripping women of their bodily autonomy.

And in response, Trump has started to panic.

Update: This Public Notice piece on the press' willingness to let Trump flip flop on choice with impunity him on it names several other policies he should not have backsies on either.

There's no earthly reason to give Trump the benefit of the doubt here. Besides dismantling the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate, the Trump administration also tried to undermine private insurance coverage for abortions, prohibited clinics from receiving federal funds under Title X if they even referred people elsewhere for abortion services, and slashed grants for teen pregnancy prevention programs. A second Trump administration will be comprehensively terrible for reproductive rights generally, not just abortion, and no amount of uninformed flip-flopping will change that.