

“I’m Speaking.” Anger, Motherhood, and The Presidential Ambitions of Kamala Harris

Dr. Aidan Smith

Tulane University, The United States

Abstract

Kamala Harris’ career has been a series of shattered glass ceilings, from prosecutor to attorney general to senator to vice-president. She navigated the challenges facing any woman pursuing seeking elected office: a need for an ever-elusive likability while still demonstrating competence and vision.

I argue that Harris worked to temper these stereotypes through an investment in a maternal identity during her campaigns for executive office. Brown and Gershon (2021), Carew (2016) and Harris-Perry (2011) explore how stereotypes of Black women both help and harm these political actors. They navigate the double bind of being perceived as leaders that are decisive and forceful while not displaying the negative impacts these traits carry for women, marking them as overbearing or domineering. Harris strategically embraced a domestic identity as her political star began to rise. A longtime single woman with a record of high-profile romantic relationships, when she began her pursuit of the presidency in 2019 Harris was recently married with an instant family, now a stepmother known as “Momala,” a familiar title created by her then-teenaged stepchildren Cole and Ella Emhoff. Her embrace of the Momala identity was even more central in 2024, with her adult stepchildren’s appearance at the Democratic National Convention.

Discourse analysis of Harris’s speeches, campaign communications, and public reactions demonstrates the campaigns strategic use of this identity. This project considers how Harris both leveraged and avoided gendered and racialized stereotypes to rally support for the 2020 Democratic ticket and her own unprecedented presidential campaign in 2024.

Keywords: american presidency, motherhood, black women, stereotypes