

The San Francisco ghosts in Kamala Harris past show that she knows which sausages to orally embrace

by [Tiana Lowe](#)

Few outside of California know or care who Willie Brown is. But that may be about to change.

Brown spent around a quarter of a century as de facto royalty in California, first serving more than three decades as a member of the California Assembly (15 years as its speaker), and then eight years as mayor of San Francisco.

He also once carried out an open extramarital affair with a young prosecutor named Kamala Harris, currently a U.S. senator and leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Now, we're far beyond the point that a personal past like that disqualifies a candidate. Harris, after all, is vying to challenge a thrice-married man who once graced the cover of Playboy and publicized his infidelity on the cover of the New York Post. Candidates' personal lives no longer warrant deep investigation, unless they tell us something about their professional and political lives.

Unfortunately for Harris, the Willie Brown story is not strictly personal. It's also professional.

When Harris was barely 30, she began dating Brown, then in his 60s and speaker of the California Assembly. To be clear, an ambitious woman dating a powerful man is not alone any cause for concern. Strong women are attracted to success, and a 30-year-old assistant district attorney is hardly, say, a 21-year-old intern. But the story doesn't end there.

For one thing, Brown was [married](#) at the time. He wound up dumping Harris and returning to his wife as he became mayor. (Again, in the era of President Trump, few will clutch their pearls over this.)

More questionable than the romance is the relationship's apparent effect on her finances and her career. Brown, according to contemporary news accounts, gifted his then-girlfriend two government jobs with ample salaries — while she was just getting her start as an assistant DA.

As the San Francisco Weekly [reported](#) in 2003:

Aside from handing her an expensive BMW, Brown appointed her to two patronage positions in state government that paid handsomely — more than \$400,000 over five years. In 1994, she took a six-month leave of absence from her Alameda County job to join the Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board. Brown then appointed her to the California Medical Assistance Commission, where she served until 1998, attending two meetings a month for a \$99,000 annual salary.

(That's more than \$150,000 in current dollars.)

Even after they broke up, Brown, a San Francisco kingmaker, continued to support Harris' career, boosting her district attorney run and years later [calling](#) on Antonio Villaraigosa to stay out of the Senate race, thus clearing the field for Harris.

Just two years into her tenure as senator, Harris now wants to reach the White House.

The facts are messy, but most in California politics are. If she earned few hundred thousand dollars in taxpayer-funded patronage thanks to a personal relationship, that undermines some of her good-government cred. Or at least it requires her to explain how she's changed.

Barack Obama wisely fessed up about his drug usage long before he was a presidential candidate, and he alluded to his personal growth and past mistakes enough that it created a satisfying narrative, one that couldn't be used against him. Donald Trump was a womanizer and a brash braggart, but that was his entire brand for more than two decades. The first real instance where his past came to haunt him was when he seemed to confess to sexual battery on the now-infamous Access Hollywood tape. The allegations of consensual affairs never really mattered.

Harris doesn't talk about Brown. She says that it's not relevant. But part of her prosecutorial persona is a posture of toughness on corruption. But the Willie Brown story, with those big paychecks, gives off at least a whiff of cronyism. She's got to address the charge she was profiting personally off connections

to power — at least if she wants us to believe she actually stands [for the people](#).