

Nontraditional Legal Career Paths

An Interview with Rachel Palermo, Deputy Communications Director and Associate Counsel to Vice President Kamala Harris

Interviewed by Emily Mollinedo



Rachel Palermo, Deputy Communications Director and Associate Counsel to Vice President Kamala Harris, speaks with the Women Lawyer’s Journal about a career in communications and politics.

Rachel graduated from St. Olaf College with a B.A. in Political Science and Economics in 2015. After graduation, she worked for the Democratic National Committee as the Assistant Press Secretary and Director of Women’s Media during the 2016 presidential campaign.

Following the election, Rachel joined the public relations firm SKDKnickerbocker as a Senior Associate. In 2018 she began attending Notre Dame Law School. During law school, Rachel was a legal extern for Pete for America and volunteered for the Biden–Harris campaign and later their transition team.



Rachel joined the Vice President’s staff on the first day of the Biden–Harris Administration in January 2021. Notably, she finished her last semester of law school and passed the bar exam while working at the White House. At the time of publication, Rachel will have left her role as Deputy Communications Director and Associate Counsel in the Office of the Vice President and will have joined the Washington, D.C. office of Jenner & Block. As an associate in the Government Controversies and Public Policy Litigation Practice, Rachel will work on a broad range of matters dealing at the intersection of law, policy, and government regulation, which may include congressional hearings, state and federal investigations, and other matters that receive public scrutiny.

Why did you choose to work in communications after college?

RP: I knew I wanted to go to law school, so I wanted to do something that I would find fulfilling and also would help me to build a skill set that would then translate to law. With communications, you're learning how to write, think strategically, and think on your feet. That was something that people always said was important in law—being nimble and an effective communicator. My thinking was that the cause itself (the 2016 presidential campaign) was very compelling to me, and I would develop an important skill set since I wanted to go to law school. And even if I chose not to go to law school, those skills I would gain in communications would translate to any career.

Can you tell our readers a bit about your path to your current position as Deputy Communications Director and Associate Counsel to the Vice President?

RP: I found myself drawn towards politics again and compelled by a candidate when I was in law school—I volunteered, and then externed, for Pete Buttigieg's presidential campaign. When his campaign ended, I volunteered for the Biden-Harris campaign and eventually their transition team. Through all of this, I found myself reconnecting with people from my old life in politics, and a lot of those connections and the connections I made through my volunteer work ended up opening the doors to this Office.

What kind of work do you do in this current role?

RP: My day-to-day work is split between communications and legal work.

Within communications, I work on the communications and messaging strategy for the Vice President. I advise her, brief her, and staff her for interviews and public appearances. I also draft her messaging and talking points. Additionally, I lead the day-to-day operations of the communications team, which includes the press, digital, and speechwriting teams. I also work with reporters on profiles and stories they are writing about the Vice President.

One of my favorite roles in my communications work has been handling the media strategy around the Vice President's response to the *Dobbs* decision. A lot of my time over the last year was spent on reproductive rights—that has been something where I have really felt the benefit of this intersection of being a communications person and a lawyer. As a lawyer, I have a unique understanding of the implications of what is at stake, what this decision meant, and how to communicate it to the American people.

Through my role as Associate Counsel, I work on a wide variety of tasks, including responding to oversight requests, ensuring compliance with ethics and election laws, analyzing legal developments, and reviewing contracts.

In what ways have you noticed that your legal education helps you in your work?

RP: The biggest thing I've noticed is that my legal education allows me to understand the legal implications of current events. Understanding the issues the Vice President is communicating about has really helped me. She is a lawyer through and through (she was the Attorney General for the second largest justice department behind the U.S. Department of Justice), so she really thinks through things like a lawyer.

What advice would you give to law students or lawyers looking at a career in communications, politics, government, or any nontraditional role?

RP: First, I think it's important to offer to volunteer or get involved. So much of my path involved me reaching out to see how I could be helpful. Second, be someone who people want to have on their team. Be collaborative, and be a "no task too small" person. I always try to jump in and help with whatever is needed.

I also want to share some advice that someone gave to me when I first took this job.

This person previously worked for the White House and when I started, she told me to make a list of all the things I want to accomplish in the job, because some of the things will become so routine that I will have to remind myself that at one point I thought it was really special and it was something that I once wanted to accomplish. She then advised that once I'd checked everything off that list, it would be time to assess and to ask myself: "Am I getting the growth I need? Is it time to revisit? Is it time to make an ask about my role?"

It's funny because when I look at my list, it includes things like, "travel in the Vice President's motorcade and on Air Force Two," and "brief the Vice President." These are things that I have been able to do so many times and they have become a part of my day-to-day routine. I'm grateful I was told to make this list because it's helped keep me grounded on the days that get really long and when I feel very tired. After all, this is a challenging job.

What is something on the list that you're happiest to have crossed off?

RP: My favorite moment of the job was when the Vice President attended an event in Minnesota, where my family is from, and she was able to meet my parents and my three siblings. It was so meaningful for me and for both of my parents—it was beyond their wildest dreams. And my mom, who is from Lebanon and came to the U.S. in her twenties, had an even greater appreciation for it as an immigrant in this country.

What has been one of your favorite aspects of your job?

RP: I have had the privilege of visiting all these places traveling with the Vice President and being able to see her interacting on the world stage with foreign leaders. Seeing her, especially as our nation's first woman, first Black American, and the first South Asian American to be Vice President, has been a front-row seat to history.

How can law students and lawyers get involved with campaigns?

RP: Lawyers have such a good skillset and campaigns love having them volunteer. Campaigns often have groups such as "Lawyers for Biden." The campaigns I've worked on would do everything they could to find people who would help with pro bono legal work. Sometimes it's being a poll observer, doing legal research, or serving on policy committees to develop ideas. These entities sometimes don't know how to advertise it, but the reality is they are really looking for it. It's just a matter of trying to figure out how to reach out and offer those skills that you have.

Anything else you'd want to add for the younger attorneys and law students reading?

RP: In law school, you're often pulled in the direction of the paths of least resistance because those are often where the recruiting structure is the clearest or more people have done it that way. But I think what's important to know is that oftentimes, there is no path to these sorts of opportunities. There was no way for me to apply for this job. It was a series of staying involved with people I had known in a previous world. It was a series of me reaching out to be helpful and volunteer and be a part of things that I believed in. There wasn't a path to it, so I think if this is something that you're interested in, you have to be okay with not following one of the more rigid paths. Be willing to go out on a limb and see if these opportunities exist, because there's not a path, you can't predict it, and you can't plan for it, but you can set yourself up so you may get the opportunity.



Interviewed by
Emily Mollinedo
Assistant Federal Defender