

## **Beyond the Pillow Talk: How Gender, Media and Politics Shape the Role and Legacy of First Ladies, 1961-2012**

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### **Abstract**

By analyzing the initiatives and involvements of first ladies through the lens of political party affiliation, this study provides a unique way to understand the manner and extent to which each political party leveraged the first lady's office and each woman's impact and legacy. This study explores the political relationship shared between each presidential couple as deemed important by the administration and press. Ultimately, the study's content analysis indicates that there is a relationship between party affiliation, initiative selection and influence exertion. While Republican first ladies pursue initiatives that more closely align with the president's domestic social policy priorities, Democratic first ladies are more systematically integrated into the traditional political sphere. Republican first ladies are most frequently associated with education and Democratic first ladies with health. Examining the changing role for the first ladies adds great depth to the conversation surrounding the evolution office as it relates to gender dynamics and party affiliation. As the United States elects more females into decision-making roles and holds greater expectations for its presidential spouses, it is critical to understand how not only first ladies, but all elected female officials and women navigate obstacles to influence national political discourse and policies.

**Keywords: First Ladies, Women's Studies, Media Framing**

### **1. Introduction**

Expected to be as talented at captivating a global audience with a stirring national convention speech as delighting the taste buds of readers with a recipe entry in *Family Circle's* Presidential Cookie Bake-Off, first ladies hold a powerful, yet constitutionally vague position in the nation's highest office. Despite having the freedom to determine the extent to which they will leverage "one of the most influential podiums in the world," first ladies have historically been scrutinized for either over- or under-exercising the office's distinctive position of authority.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors allowed the first lady's office to expand in political legitimacy in recent decades. In 1978, Public Law 95-750 mandated that the office receive funding independent of the White House budget, bolstering the autonomous authority of the first lady.<sup>2,3</sup> Furthermore, the proximity to the West Wing, coupled with the presidents' increasingly frequent endorsements of spouses' projects, contributed to the position's expansion.<sup>4</sup> Largely initiated by former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt's groundbreaking activism, influenced by the growing women's liberation movement and instigated by the press, the public also raised both expectations and criticisms of first ladies. Today, the office plays a pivotal role in influencing the public's perceptions of political parties and has been deemed "a measurable factor in how to vote for the president."<sup>5</sup>

Despite criticisms of exercising unmerited political influence, a politically detached first lady is considered less influential both during and after the president's term.<sup>6</sup> While the public admires a first lady who embodies the traditional, yet often confining, ideals of American femininity, activist first ladies receive higher approval ratings. This indicates that when it comes to the first lady, "the public has accepted a public policy advisory role in general,

as long as the person performing that role appears to be successful.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, first ladies walk a tightrope as the office functions in a manner deemed appropriate by the president, press and public.

Mass media provides first ladies access to a wider platform to communicate with the public but compounds the expectations placed on them. Press coverage is a strong indicator of cultural norms, and thus gender norms; studying it also provides an interesting lens to understand how the public perceived first ladies’ activities over time. The public relies on first ladies to serve as “spokespersons for women’s issues,” which feeds the misperception that first ladies’ activities are only important to women, not the entire nation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the notion that first lady scholarship is “trivial or unworthy of serious academic attention,” this study suggests that first ladies have the ability to shift the national discourse on critical issues.<sup>9</sup> The presidential spouse possesses access unrivaled by any other staff member and an unmatched understanding of the president’s personal and professional motivations.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, to understand the role of the first lady is to better understand the country’s discourse as it relates to gender politics.<sup>11,12</sup> Lastly, increased attention has been paid to first ladies’ private influence, affectionately coined “pillow talk” by Betty Ford, on presidents.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Analyzing the extent to which parties relied on the first lady to embody, shape or promote certain policies and ideologies is critical in studying the causal relationship between political party and first lady initiatives. This study highlights the multitude of ways in which first ladies impacted the nation and argues that this increasingly influential role is worthy of scholarly inquiry.

## **2. Influences on the First Lady**

Though this study isolates party affiliation, a range of variables inspired each first lady’s choice of initiatives. Variables like first ladies’ “background, ambition, vision and ideology” influence historic fulfillment of the role.<sup>16</sup> The closer the first lady’s access to the White House office, the more politically active the first lady has tended to be. Personal preferences and experiences also assist in determining a first lady’s initiative selection.<sup>17</sup> Betty Ford explained that both “personal connection” and “ideological belief” influenced involvements championed while in office.<sup>18</sup> Rachael Kronzek argues that first ladies’ inspiration is “not an extension of their husbands’ agenda...but rather stems from their own value judgments and personal experiences.”<sup>19</sup> When asked what inspired Lady Bird Johnson, the former first lady answered, “It was something my heart could sing to.”<sup>20</sup>

As women became more politically active, so too did first ladies; the office has long represented America’s perception of women.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, media began to link first ladies’ activities to the growing political involvement of women nationwide. Thus, first ladies felt pressure from the press and public when selecting initiatives. There remains an invisible line – marked by media’s enforcement of gender norms and first ladies’ role as an unelected official – that limits first ladies’ political involvement. To neutralize divisive issues associated with the first lady, media outlets often associate the office’s activities with more acceptable or familiar female roles.<sup>22</sup>

Using the theory of Personification Framing, a journalistic practice that portrays an individual “as the embodiment of an ideological performance, thus rendering the complexities of that performance quickly and easily comprehensible,” Burns argues that this gender-based coverage restricts the office’s political involvement to traditional feminine domains and diminishes first ladies’ exhaustive contributions.<sup>23</sup> Though first ladies often substantiate American women as “newsmakers and women’s issues and activities as newsworthy,” gendered press framing ensures that these issues stay on the margins of political discourse.<sup>24</sup>

## **3. Research Design**

Using the administration’s political party as the independent variable and the presidents’ State of the Union addresses and first ladies’ press coverage as the dependent variables, this study examines how political party affiliation has a causal relationship on a first lady’s initiatives and involvement. These texts are used because the State of the Union provides an outlet for each president to state the administration’s agenda, while the press largely communicates first ladies’ activities. Because of the policy engagement of first ladies like Lady Bird Johnson, Hillary Clinton and Rosalynn Carter, this study hypothesizes that Democratic first ladies pursue initiatives that more closely align with Democratic presidents’ domestic social policy priorities than do Republican first ladies.

### **3.1 Selecting the Population**

The ten first ladies who served from 1961-2012 comprise this study’s population. This list includes Jacqueline Lee

Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, Lady Bird [Claudia Alta] Taylor Johnson, Thelma Catherine “Pat” Ryan Nixon, Elizabeth Ann “Betty” Bloomer Warren Ford, Eleanor Rosalynn Smith Carter, Anne Frances “Nancy” Robbins Davis Reagan, Barbara Pierce Bush, Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton, Laura Lane Welch Bush and Michelle Lavaughn Robinson Obama. Though Roosevelt is credited with laying the groundwork for first ladies’ increased engagement, this specific population is useful for several reasons. First, women in this era were trapped between conflicting societal demands. Women were growing increasingly more demanding of equality and expected the first lady to mirror women’s rights efforts. Notably, though politically engaged first ladies typically enjoyed higher favorability ratings, this activism was met with criticisms of exerting unmerited political influence. These dual expectations draw a fine line for nearly every first lady, but especially the first ladies selected for this study.

Despite factors like the women’s liberation movement, the founding of the National Organization for Women and the birth control pill’s approval, women were still limited by smaller paychecks, lower levels of education and the expectation that home was the woman’s domain.<sup>25</sup> Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique* gave voice to women discontent with the gender-based boundaries in this era. The 1960s were also marked by women’s rights groups’ increased political activism. In 1961, President Kennedy initiated The President’s Commission on the Status of Women, sparking increased attention to women’s lives in the United States with its 1963 report. The Equal Pay Act, which made it illegal for an employer to alter wages based on gender, also passed in 1963. Gender-separated classified ads were deemed illegal in 1968.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, with the growth of mass media in the 1960s, first ladies names “moved out of the society columns and onto the front page.”<sup>27</sup> During this time, expectations grew for first ladies.

This study includes five Democratic first ladies. Jacqueline Kennedy oversaw a renovation that restored the White House’s heritage and artistic beauty. A catalyst for the National Endowment for the Arts, Kennedy sought to preserve America’s cultural heritage and was also a tremendous source of strength for the nation after President Kennedy’s assassination.<sup>28</sup> A passionate advocate for environmental conservation, Lady Bird Johnson sparked the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 and supported anti-poverty and -discrimination programs, most notably Head Start.<sup>29</sup> Rosalynn Carter believed a first lady’s work should be substantive and attended weekly working lunches with President Carter.<sup>30</sup> Carter’s compassion for those suffering from mental health illnesses is highly celebrated.<sup>31</sup> Hillary Clinton chaired the Task Force on National Health Care Reform, advised on public policy and advocated for women’s economic equality, public health and children’s rights.<sup>32,33</sup> Lastly, Michelle Obama inspired the nation’s children to be healthier through the “Let’s Move!” initiative and advocated for the arts and civic engagement.

Among the five Republican first ladies this study analyzes, Pat Nixon was the first lady who traveled more than any of the office’s predecessors and promoted volunteerism.<sup>34</sup> Betty Ford candidly and courageously advocated for women’s rights and health issues, specifically breast cancer and substance abuse. A proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment, Ford very vocally embraced the influence held by the first lady’s office.<sup>35</sup> Nancy Reagan also championed substance abuse education through the “Just Say No” campaign. In 1988, Reagan became America’s first presidential spouse to testify before the U.N. General Assembly regarding drug trafficking and traveled nationwide encouraging children to avoid drug use.<sup>36</sup> Barbara Bush advocated for literacy, supported civic rights and gender equality and encouraged volunteerism.<sup>37,38</sup> Laura Bush championed education reform, early childhood literacy and women’s health.<sup>39</sup> Bush launched the “Ready to Read, Ready to Learn” program and supported “No Child Left Behind.”

### 3.2 Research Strategy

To analyze the extent to which first ladies’ initiatives aligned with the respective administration’s domestic social policies, this study uses content analysis to compare each president’s annual State of the Union address with a random sample of each first lady’s newspaper coverage. These findings are supplemented with qualitative research from other first lady scholarship and press clippings. Content analysis is a reliable technique for analyzing “the values, sentiments, intentions and ideologies” expressed in both the presidents’ speeches and first ladies’ press.<sup>40</sup> Because the evolution of the first lady’s office “paralleled the rise of the rhetorical presidency,” quantifying how the presidents communicated priorities compared to how the media interpreted and communicated the first ladies’ activities offers an intriguing study.<sup>41</sup> Fifty-three State of the Union addresses are included in this study. For each first lady’s term, every fifth article from the top 100 most relevant newspaper articles from the Summon and ProQuest databases was pulled, resulting in 20 articles for each woman.

A uniform set of concept categories related to domestic social policy is also used to consistently measure the dependent variable. These concept categories include: education, health, environment, civil rights, service/civic engagement and the arts. To quantify the frequency with which these categories are referenced, meaning units, or keywords that indicate significance related to the category are used.<sup>42</sup> This method of content analysis determines how frequently issues pertaining to these concept categories are mentioned in each subject’s public messaging.

## 4. Results

Ultimately, this study's results shed light on not only a pattern of initiatives selected by each party's first ladies, but also the methods by which first ladies exert influence. Table 1 indicates that on average, the difference in alignment between Republican presidents' addresses and first ladies' coverage in words related to domestic social policy is 0.25%, compared to Democrats 0.40%. Republican couples' messaging varies by 1.48%, compared to Democrats by 2.42%. This means that in the public eye, Republican couples' public messaging is more closely aligned.

Table 1. Percent Difference in Alignment between Political Parties' Presidential Couples

	Education	Health	Environment	Civil Rights	Service/Civic Engagement	The Arts	Total Difference	Avg. Difference
Dem.	1.39%	-0.66%	0.41%	0.57%	1.10%	-0.39%	2.42%	0.40%
Rep.	-0.46%	0.46%	1.07%	0.31%	0.47%	-0.38%	1.48%	0.25%

The smaller the difference, the more similar or closely aligned the parties' presidential couple's messaging. Democrats are closely aligned in messaging pertaining to the environment, but least similar in messaging related to education. Republicans are very similar in civil rights' messaging, but have the greatest separation when addressing environmental issues. Comparatively, Democratic presidential couples vary by 1.39% in education messaging, meaning that Democratic couples are less aligned than the Republicans at -0.46%. Each negative number indicates that the party's first ladies are more frequently associated with the category than their husbands. Therefore, Republican first ladies are more frequently associated with education and Democratic first ladies with health.

Furthermore, the Clintons have the largest gap in a particular concept category with a difference of 0.91% in education messaging, whereas the Reagans and Carters share the closest alignment in issues of environment and the arts, respectively. Overall, the Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson are the most closely aligned, with an average difference of -0.01% while George W. and Laura Bush are least aligned with an average difference of 0.50%. Table 2 illustrates how frequently first ladies' press coverage mentions words related to domestic social policy. Largely due to the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, Barbara Bush is most frequently associated with education. Clinton captured headlines by serving on the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform. The first ladies' most frequently referenced category is education with 783 mentions.

Table 2. Mention Frequency of Domestic Social Policy Issues in First Ladies' Press Coverage

	Education	Health	Environment	Civil Rights	Service/Civic Engagement	The Arts	% Total
Kennedy	48	0	12	20	11	27	1.39%
Johnson	60	14	102	30	30	13	2.19%
Nixon	74	15	15	31	46	7	1.91%
Ford	30	26	2	30	25	7	1.68%
Carter	19	51	4	57	51	7	1.75%
Reagan	89	84	15	40	27	23	2.43%
B. Bush	193	48	47	100	81	14	2.50%
Clinton	38	118	2	24	61	0	2.46%
L. Bush	166	52	11	79	60	32	2.66%
Obama	66	142	55	73	66	5	2.84%

These quantifiable results reveal that historically, Republican first ladies are more frequently associated with the categories of education, civil rights, service/civic engagement and the arts. Qualitatively, this holds true as well; Barbara and Laura Bush were deeply invested in literacy, Ford supported gender equality and Reagan championed volunteerism. Conversely, Democratic first ladies are more frequently associated with health and the environment. This resonates with Johnson's commitment to beautification, Carter's advocacy for mental health, Clinton's

leadership in health care reform and Obama's work with childhood obesity. Though both parties' first ladies had, in theory, the ability to interpret the role's function, it is interesting to analyze the trends that exist within both parties.

## 5. Analysis of Results

### 5.1 Influence Exertion

These findings pose an interesting question: is alignment an indicator of how a first lady exerts the office's influence? Initially, the hypothesis assumed that if a presidential couple was closely aligned in what the president said during the State of the Union address and what the press said about the first lady, the first lady was more likely to be engaged in politicking and therefore, Democratic first ladies would more closely align with the administration in the social policy realm. However, the data indicates otherwise. In determining if a relationship exists between alignment and methods of exerting influence, a content analysis for traditionally policy-oriented words indicates that Democratic first ladies' press coverage contains 20% more mentions of political words like "campaign" or "policy."

Democrats are both on the lowest and highest end of the spectrum as Clinton is most frequently depicted through a policy-oriented lens with 170 mentions, while Kennedy received only 40 mentions. Republicans experience a slight decline from Nixon's 86 words to Ford's 57 and Reagan's 53. Democrats have a steep decline from Clinton's 170 to Obama's 94. However, the overall upward trend of policy-oriented words in both parties' first lady press coverage validates the assertion that as women became more vocal in demanding equal rights, the public became more comfortable with or demanding of a first lady's embrace of increasingly substantial involvement.

These findings indicate that policy-oriented first ladies' priorities align less closely with the presidential administration. Several Republican first ladies are noted for not engaging in policy, but adopting a public persona that was more closely aligned with the respective presidents' State of the Union rhetoric. First ladies like Barbara Bush and Pat Nixon operated in more of the private sector sphere, rather than pioneering policy initiatives. Conversely, Democratic first lady Johnson influenced the passing of legislation and Clinton launched a Senate race while serving as first lady. Bill Clinton, much to the public's chagrin, remarked that a vote for President Clinton meant, "two for the price of one!"<sup>43</sup>

### 5.2 Influence and Intersection of Press and Gender Framing

Women from both political parties also did much to advance the role of women in American society. Johnson hosted "Women Do-er" lunches to encourage conversations surrounding important issues facing women, championed civil rights and fought for greater female political and educational representation. Carter, in solidarity with Johnson and Ford, attended the Women's Conference in 1977, secured higher rates of female employment at the Pentagon and called for more females on the Supreme Court and within the administration. Clinton formed the Violence Against Women office within the Department of Justice and championed women's rights internationally while Obama toured the country highlighting the administration's commitment to women's rights.

Nixon, the first presidential candidate's spouse to speak at the Republican convention, advocated for more women in decision-making roles, fought for female nominees to the Supreme Court and encouraged females to volunteer with political campaigns. Ford lobbied for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and women's right to choose, and defended women's roles in the workplace and at home. Ford's courage in the face of a mastectomy encouraged women nationwide to schedule mammograms.<sup>44</sup> Barbara Bush also endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment and famously quipped to Wellesley College graduates, "Who knows? Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps and preside over the White House as the president's spouse. And I wish him well."<sup>45</sup> Laura Bush publically supported women's rights in Afghanistan and by partnering with the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, called attention to women's heart disease.<sup>46</sup>

All first ladies, regardless of political party, believed that more women must be included in policy-making decisions. Across party lines, first ladies vigorously encouraged presidential administrations to support women's rights and representation. However, many were trapped by the double-binds that type cast first ladies as too much of a housewife, too much of a policy-pusher or as one journalist "delicately" put it, too much of an "overbearing yuppie wife from hell."<sup>47</sup> At the same time first ladies were urged to champion women's rights, gender-based media framing offered a limited perspective on their activities. First ladies legitimized women's health in public discourse, joined in solidarity with gender equality supporters and struggled in a very public way to overcome the conflicting expectations placed on women.

For example, Carter worked side-by-side with senior officials, met weekly with President Carter to discuss policy implications on initiatives he championed and managed a staff of 20 as Honorary Chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health.<sup>48</sup> However, Carter's press coverage includes quotes like, "I feel nothing is coming out of the White House that resembles a fashion statement. They are playing things down and Rosalynn Carter doesn't make clothes important."<sup>49</sup> A newspaper profile on Nixon stated that no one:

"would deny that Mrs. Nixon richly deserved her titles as Outstanding Homemaker of the Year (1953), Mother of the Year (1955) and the Nation's Ideal Housewife (1957)" since Nixon represented, as family friend Dr. Norman Vincent Peal described, "the prototype of the finest, type of American woman and could be president of an association of good mothers and housewives."<sup>50</sup>

This coverage exemplifies the bind that first ladies experience. This bind demands perfection from a woman considered the epitome of what an American woman should be – attractive, fashionable, intelligent, articulate and successful, but not in a way that overshadows her husband. First ladies can assuredly be women of "style and substance," but too often, style (or lack thereof) trumps first ladies' substantive contributions.<sup>51</sup>

### 5.3 Political Parties Use of the First Lady

First ladies have been used to "humanize" the president, to connect with specific voter bases and to foster state relations. This study's findings indicate that while Republican first ladies are more closely aligned with the husband's administration, Democratic first ladies have historically been more systematically integrated into the legislative sphere through leadership appointments, Congressional testimonies and public lobbying for pieces of legislation. However, Republican first ladies' work with private organizations could be considered just as politically congruent as Democratic first ladies' legislative work.

Kennedy pushed for Congress' support of a law that gave the White House permanent ownership of any donated item. Johnson served as Head Start's National Chair and is renowned for the successful passage of "Lady Bird's Bill," legislation aimed at making America's highways more scenic. Congress approved funding for Carter's advisory assistance in enacting the president's initiatives. Carter also embraced a publically active role, serving as Active Honorary Chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health, networking with congressmen in support of aging populations, overseeing the White House Conference on Aging and testifying in front of the Senate Subcommittee on Health. Clinton chaired the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform, testified in front of Congress and is credited with the passing of the Children's Health Insurance Program, the Adopt and Safe Families Act and Foster Care Independence. Michelle Obama galvanized support for the "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act."

Nixon served on the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped and as honorary chair of "Right to Read."<sup>52</sup> However, those close to the couple commented that President Nixon rarely consulted the former first lady on matters facing the administration. An article in *The New York Times* states, "As a former Nixon aide commented, 'I can't imagine Dick saying, 'An awful thing happened in Cambodia today, Pat.'"<sup>53</sup> This reinforces the claim that the extent to which a president desired the first lady to be involved either limited or enabled her activities and that president's "commitment to women's issues might be examined through his relationship with his wife."<sup>54</sup> Coincidentally, Nixon is the only president with no mentions of "woman" or "women" in his State of the Unions.

Reagan leveraged support for the "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign and oversaw the passing of the National Crusade for a Drug Free America into law. However, it was not until 1995 that Reagan defended the initiative at a federal level. Barbara Bush founded the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and volunteered for countless organizations. Never appointed to an official or honorary position within government, Barbara Bush preferred to operate behind closed doors and is considered the driving force behind President Bush's support of the Hate Crimes Statistic Act. Laura Bush was the first Republican first lady to testify before Congress and did so in support of education and children's welfare programs. To celebrate Laura Bush's contributions to education, Congress awarded the former first lady with the passage of the "Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian Program," or Public Law 109-149.<sup>55</sup>

Though both public advocacy and private persuasion can inspire change, systematically bringing first ladies into the political fold increased the office's legitimacy. However, it is important to consider that first ladies engaged in a wide range of activities that may not be overtly "political," but are still influential in shaping the total perception of the administration. For example, Nixon is noted for giving public tours, especially to working class families, through the White House and for inviting Americans to tour the grounds and gardens year-round. Nixon also aided those with disabilities by developing tours that addressed their needs.<sup>56</sup> Though not overtly political, these activities fuel the legacy of both the first lady and the administration.

## 6. Policy Implications

Moving forward, it is critical for both political parties to evolve with the country's changing demographics. The policy priorities of growing minority populations include: "jobs, infrastructure, education, healthy communities, immigration, criminal justice and civic participation."<sup>57</sup> The public is already familiar with first ladies working in these sectors and there is space for both political parties to build support for ideologies through the presidential spouse. Knowing that Democrats are more accepting of a legislatively engaged first lady, the party should leverage the office to deliver policy-oriented speeches, engage in political initiatives and address health inequalities nationwide. Republicans should continue to exercise first ladies' influence through partnerships with existing charities, as this approach is both in keeping with the party's political ideology and the historic Republican first lady track record. Equally important to growing minority voting blocs is increased access to civic participation. First ladies have been supportive – both publically and privately – of increasing the diversity of decision-makers and elected officials. Though not elected officials, first ladies from both parties have recognized the influence they have to support women in politics. First ladies have a powerful platform to engage voters and have lobbied for inclusivity in every arena from the Supreme Court to town halls.

## 7. Conclusion

Though this study opens the doors to many future endeavors, perhaps the most intriguing avenue for further research entails how this conversation changes when the first female is entrusted with the presidency. Will the public condemn her spouse for over- or under-exerting policy influence? Will the public expect a male presidential spouse to embrace the same social responsibilities? Will the public care what color tie he wore to a state dinner? Analyzing the changing political landscape and first lady's historic role in it adds great depth to the conversation surrounding the evolution of the office as it relates to gender dynamics and party affiliation. As the United States elects more females into decision-making roles and holds greater expectations for its presidential spouses, it is critical to understand how not only first ladies, but all elected female officials and women navigate the obstacles of public office to influence national political discourse and policies.

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