The Evolving Role of the First Lady

Determining how the media—particularly news and political magazines in this study—portrayed the First Lady during these two contrasting times could provide researchers insight into whether media coverage varies if presidents’ wives are perceived in politically active roles versus supporting roles to their husbands.

Such information garnered from the study could be a small step in determining whether the media does set agendas in its coverage of women in politics and if set societal expectations of women determine the type of coverage—positive, negative or neutral—that First Ladies receive. The evolution of the role of First Lady has been observed by many researchers. Since the creation of the First Lady title, certain characteristics have been expected from the U.S. presidents’ wives. Mayo and Meringolo explained:

The nation has always expected First Ladies to reflect ideals of home, family and womanhood. Even the term “lady” has connotations of middle- and upper-class respectability and suggests a certain kind of demeanor. These expectations illustrate the conflict all First Ladies face: As presidents’ wives or hostesses, they are inevitably on the political and public stage, but as “ladies” they are expected to stay out of politics and in the background.

It was not until 1920 that a president publicly discussed how large a contribution his wife made to his political success. That year Warren G. Harding credited his wife as being a “good scout who knows all my faults yet has stuck with me” in his nomination speech. Anthony pointed out that the First Ladies are an integral part of a presidency, whether the public realizes it or not. “Only the First Lady and the president determine the extent of her power, though she has operated without his knowledge or permission. There is an error, though unavoidable, in viewing candidates’ wives as mere handwavers and shakers.”

Most research regarding First Ladies shows that America continues to struggle with the role it wants its First Lady to play. The office is one of inherent contradictions, a reflection of the changing role of women in society and shifting public attitudes about that change. Reflecting the times of the late 18th century and through the 19th century, the country had demanded its First Ladies be supporters of their husbands’ careers, nurturers of their families and communities, keepers of the cultural heritage, and moral leaders. The First lady role continued to evolve in the 20th century. Gutin studied the changing roles of First Ladies from 1920 to 1989 and determined that First Ladies fell into the following categories: social hostesses, spokeswomen or political surrogates and independent advocates. Now, the First Lady’s role reflects the complicated role of women who are in the workplace and in politics but who also maintain the traditional role of nurturer. It seems the country wants a First Lady who can be politically active but who also maintains a nurturing character.

More openly political First Ladies are still criticized for meddling in the nation’s business, Mayo and Meringolo pointed out, “but with the domestic problems confronting the United States—the budget crisis, threats to the environment, illiteracy, inadequate health care, poor housing, crime, drug abuse and violence—have led voters to demand a First Lady who is an informed and active advocate for solutions, even as they criticize her activism. Also, the First Lady must be informed on issues, articulate and persuasive, and must present her own substantive agenda without appearing to seek power for its own sake, Mayo and Meringolo added.

Power in the hands of First Ladies has seemed to threaten many Americans. History has shown that First Ladies who have wielded power have been attacked for doing so. Mayo and Meringolo explained:

Even as the public came to accept a larger and more visible role for first ladies, many Americans have continued to be deeply ambivalent and at times hostile towards power in the hands of women. Abigail Adams, Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and other First Ladies have endured stinging criticism for having too much influence or wielding too much power.

In fact, the less power she claims, the more power she yields, Greer said of the First Lady’s role. Gutin made a similar observation, writing that First Ladies could advocate feminine concerns or issues without receiving much public criticism. However, Gutin continued, if the First Lady chooses to become involved in more substantive issues of her husband’s administration, or if she presents views on public policy that differ from those of her husband, she risks criticism that might ultimately hurt her husband’s career. In addition, the First Lady may also harm her own credibility and popularity by taking publicly unpopular stands, Gutin added. Mayo and Meringolo pointed out that First Ladies represent “the ways in which the personal and political converge in women’s lives and reveals in stark relief the continuing conflict inherent in society’s expectations of women. The First Lady remains the most visible symbol of that conflict and ambivalence in American life.”