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White House Hostess, Pet Causes Campaigner, Convention Speaker – Evolution of Position and Role of American First Lady

> "The position of First Lady has no rules, just precedent, so its evolution has been at a virtual standstill for years. If Martha Washington didn't do it, then no one is sure it should be done."
>
> Paula Poundstone

In presidential campaign and fight for votes, women's votes as well, an important part has been played by the first lady or aspirant first lady[1]. In historical context charm and charisma of a wife of a candidate could substantially strengthen his chances in the run for the White House. Women, be it wives or relatives of the candidates, supporting and advising, exerted more or less formal influence on the final shape of the campaign and subsequently, presidency. Interest or rather curiosity of the general public in the look, personality and role of consecutive first ladies can be easily observed in the study of the press from particular periods. Of course lives of some of them were more thoroughly covered, with Mary Todd Lincoln being probably the one who generated the largest interest in the 19th century and Eleanor Roosevelt as well as Jacqueline Kennedy in the 20th. However, wide, scholarly attention to the institution and the office of the first lady can be dated only to the second decade of the 20th century, which seems strange in the eye of the fact that each of the presidential spouses or associates has always been thoroughly

[1] Although historically the term First Lady used to be capitalized, today the tendency is not universal. In this paper I decided to adopt the format of "Presidential Studies Quarterly" i.e. use lowercase except from referring directly to a particular first lady or using the term as a title.

scrutinized by the public and there are rich collections of materials documenting their lives.

Until 1980s presidential spouses have been ignored in the mainstream presidential research or perceived as "trivial and not legitimate scholarly endeavor" (Watson 1997: 808). Studies concerning office and position of the first ladies were few and far between, usually anecdotal in nature and limited to their role as wives and mothers or hostesses of the White House, with no systematic approach to the subject.[2] The situation began to change in the last decades of the 20th century, mainly due to the growing number of initiatives aiming at commemoration of public service of particular presidential spouses. Scholarly attention to the institution of the first lady became visible particularly in publication of biographies and monographs, preparation of TV documentaries or in organization of a variety of conferences and public events such as opening of National Garden in Washington D.C. – a monument dedicated to the first ladies (with participation of Ladybird Johnson, Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter, Nancy Regan, Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton) or the exhibition of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History. In order to promote legacies of US first ladies, National First Ladies' Library was opened in Canton, Ohio, in addition to first ladies' sections in various presidential libraries throughout the country. The following paper constitutes a summary of the current state of research on the role and position of the office of first lady in historical and contemporary perspective.

Historically the term first lady is an unofficial title designating a wife of an American president or a president's female relative (usually sister, niece, daughter or daughter in law) serving as his hostesses and handling the social schedule of the White House when the president is widowed or unmarried. Initially, spouses of the first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams were referred to as Lady Washington and Lady Adams – such titles still steeped in the British culture of royalty and aristocracy. Subsequent president Thomas Jefferson was a widower by the time he was elected, and he conferred duties of the White House hostess upon his daughters. However, both Martha Jefferson Randolph and Mary Jefferson Eppes, were very often unable to perform the task as they had to share their time between Washington obligations and their own numerous families (Schneider, Schneider 2010: 387). Thus, in the time of their absence Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison, Jefferson's Secretary of State, took on the role of White House hostess. When James Madison became president, Dolley Madison officially took up the duties she had

[2] Margaret Bassett, *Profiles and Portraits of American Presidents and their Wives* (Freeport 1969); Sol Barzman, *The First Ladies* (New York 1970); Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History* (New York 1988); Myra G. Gutin, *The Presidential Partners: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1989).

been fulfilling for almost eight years and became probably the most famous of the early presidential spouses, admired for her ability to combine both domestic and ceremonial role of president's wife, "influencing policy and politics – all while not overstepping the boundaries" (*The President & Family*). According to popular legend, she was the first of presidential spouses to be called First Lady after her death in 1848. President Zachary Taylor, is said to have eulogized Dolley Madison during her funeral as the "first lady of our land" (Carosella 2012: 29), no *record of his eulogy is existing, however*.

The term "the first lady in the land" was first used in print on March 31, 1860, in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* referring to Harriet Lane, the White House hostess for her bachelor uncle, President James Buchanan (Anthony 2011). The title was also occasionally used as a term denoting presidential spouse during presidency of Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) and Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881). Lucy Hayes was described with this name in an article by Mary Clemmer Ames in the "*Independent*" describing Hayes's inauguration (Schneider, Schneider 2010: iv). The term became finally firmly establish in national conscience in 1912 by a Broadway comedy about Dolley Madison entitled *First Lady of the Land*.

> Many of the 20th century women who held the title detested it as outmoded and Jacqueline Kannedy even initially forbade her staff to use it (Caroli 1985: xvi), claiming that it was more suited to "a saddle horse" (Troy 2003). Nowadays, despite the above mentioned objections the term first lady is widely and commonly used, yet, especially in the publications of the last decade, occasionally it is being replaced with more neutral terms like presidential spouse or first spouse. According to Watson introduction of these new terms may arise from anticipation of the situation when one day a woman will be elected president and the title "first lady" will become obsolete. It will be then replaced by new collocations like presidential mate or presidential partner or the two previously mentioned ones: presidential spouse or first spouse (2000: 11).

Unlike the role of the President, whose role and prerogatives are clearly described in the Constitution, the position, duties and obligations connected with the post of the First Lady were never mentioned in the Constitution or any other official document. Traditionally women holding this title have been perceived as a symbol of American womanhood, both nationally and internationally. In this way the role of First Lady has shifted and formalized over the history of the United States, usually under pressure of the circumstances, the press and the public, whose expectations "have influenced the conduct of presidential spouses, limiting their freedom and privacy" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: iv). Lack of precise guidelines, which would clearly delineate scope of activism, duties and prerogatives of the first ladies makes the position of a presidential spouse quite peculiar and leads to remarks that the role of first

lady is "semiprofessional" and "ill-defined" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: iv). Peculiarity of this unofficial office has been aptly and wittingly summarized by Betty Caroli in the subtitle of her monograph about first ladies where she called the post "the most demanding, unpaid, unelected job in America" (Caroli 1995). Thus, paradoxically, although unsalaried (apart from the budget for paying their staff) and totally unofficial in character, the office of first lady, in the course of time, evolved into one of the most visible offices in America, serving a critical function and having an undeniable influence in presidential administrations.

Approaching the institution of first lady from historical perspective, specialist in the subject (Schneider, Schneider 2010; Watson 1997; Caroli 1995) are quite unanimous in outlining certain distinct eras in the development of this office, within which majority of women holding the post exhibited "some common institutional approaches, roles and responsibilities" (Watson 1997: 808). Thus, during the initial period after the Revolution, the position of first lady was shaped as a public ceremonial office, unofficial in character, yet responsible for "social functions" (Watson 1997: 810). The first ladies of that time, like Martha Washington, Abigail Adams or Dolley Madison, had a difficult task of setting certain precedents upon which subsequent first ladies could rest. They had no role models to draw on, as they could not openly imitate the conduct of queens because the USA rejected monarchy, yet at the same time they had to see to it that as representatives of the newly created country they receive due respect. The first presidential spouses had to learn to balance "commoner and queen" (Caroli 2010: 33) the formal with the informal and their private needs with public demands, which was not an easy task to achieve. They were widely known in important social circles and publicly admired, and, according to biographical research, probably in private played a role of informal advisers to the president. Although, as contemporary observers stressed, each of them was of different character, they were all fully aware of the "importance and dignity of the position thrust upon them" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: iv). Martha Washington was perceived as meek and avoiding getting involved openly in political debates. In order to avoid any suspicions that she interfered with George Washington's obligations as the head of government, she helped her husband to fulfill the obligations of head of state, taking up certain ceremonial duties that "her husband's schedule did not permit" (Caroli 2010: 7). She was always acting with utmost care, lest her behavior could lead to criticism of her husband's office, thus she established the precedent of not accepting any private gifts or invitations (Schneider, Schneider 2010: 6). By her follower in the office, Abigail Adams, she was described as an unparalleled paragon of "patience, prudence and discretion" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: 18). In comparison to Martha Washington, Abigail Addams

was much better prepared for the position of the first lady, being widely read, acquainted with nation's most influential personas, having European experience and vast political knowledge. Yet, she could not use her potential fully, "confined by the conventions of the era" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: 21) had to constrain her ambitions and unorthodox views, especially on the status of women, so as not to provoke attacks on her husband's administration. The third of the eminent presidential spouses in the initial period, Dolley Madison, fully relished her public role and developing her potential fully, becoming "a standard against which later first ladies were judged" (Anthony 2008). She was particularly admired for mastering her role as a White House hostess, opening the building to the public or initiating the tradition of inaugural balls and for her diplomatic skills which helped her to bring together representatives of opposite political fractions (Foster 2011: 18).

Presidential spouses between the years 1829-1869 were less active and influential in terms of social function of hostess of the White House for various reasons. After the election of the first log cabin president Andrew Jackson in 1829, far reaching simplicity began to be promoted in Washington, which also influenced the office of the first lady (Eddins 2008). It can be first of all seen also in nomenclature, presidential wives were no longer called lady but simply Mrs. Majority of presidential spouses in that period were in their late fifties, lacking social experience needed to enter the White House, having no particular gift or preparation for the post and coming from circles with no tradition of public service. They dreaded both the obligations connected with the position of the first lady and attacks of political enemies of their husbands (Schneider, Schneider 2010: v). Some of them were in poor health (Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor) or grief stricken (Jane Pierce)[3] and thus were usually substituted by young, inexperienced female relatives, usually their daughters or daughters in law, even though only three of the presidents of that period, being either widowers (Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren) and bachelor (James Buchanan), had no option but to turn to substitutes (Caroli 2010: 36). Within the above mentioned period, the only women who received any kind of recognition were Sarah Polk and Harriet Lane, and, to a certain extent, Mary Todd Lincoln, who, however, through her unconventional and erratic behavior, managed to build anti-example of what a first spouse should be like.

[3] Only the first ladies in pre-Civil War era used health problems as an excuse to delegate their public duties to some substitutes. Other presidential spouses who suffered from serious illnesses during their terms in the White House (Helen Taft, Florence Harding and Lou Hoover) gave up their responsibilities only temporarily. Betty Ford, who fought with breast cancer got engaged in campaign which raised social awareness and promoted prophylaxis of this particular disease.

Sarah Polk who entered the White House in 1845, she was relatively young (42), had relatively decent education for the women standards of that period and no children. All these factors "increased her ability to participate in her husband's carrier" (Caroli 2010: 69). She is credited as one of the presidential spouses who treated the post of a first lady as a mission, "bringing the sense of diligence to the role" (Foster 2011: 43) and making the public aware that it required utmost attention, time and personal engagement. Similarly, Harriet Lane, a niece of President Buchanan, who acted as the first lady during his presidential term (1857-61), is considered to be "the first of the modern First Ladies", who managed to "capture the imagination of contemporaries" (Taylor 1963: 213). She reminded to a large extend first ladies of late 20th century, using popularity of her office to promote American art as well as philanthropic actions and various public causes, for example being one of the first people of influence to plead for rights of Indians (Taylor 1963: 219). The third of the above mentioned women, Mary Lincoln, practically throughout all her four years as the first lady (1861-65) elicited unremitting criticism (Caroli 2010: 56). Her initial love of parties and expensive attires, spending sprees, social pretensions as well promotion of favor-seekers and then her prolonged, intense mourning rituals and interest in spiritualism would have stirred aversion in any period of American history. However, in the years when the country was shattered by the Civil War, in the eyes of public opinion such behavior was perceived as succession of particularly grave and unforgivable transgressions, doubled by her southern descent and rumors about southern loyalties. Thus, both among her contemporaries and the further generations, she earned the label of femme fatale, self-defeating first lady.

After the Civil War, during which women turned out to be so active beyond the traditional sphere of "rising good citizens for the Republic" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: v), taking up many "men's duties" like managing farms and businesses left behind by the men who enlisted, raising money for various patriotic causes, providing medical care for the wounded and disabled, general status of American women began to change and such gradual changes could be also observed in the status of the first lady. In the last decades of the 19th century women's reform efforts made it more acceptable for them to leave the home sphere and appear in public. As a result social and ceremonial duties of presidential spouses also multiplied. They became expected to be much more on display, yet still as paragons of supportive and caring wife and mother. The press became a force in shaping their office as the public demanded more and more information about them (Schneider, Schneider 2010: vi) and thus first ladies stopped to be local figures widely known only by the elites (Caroli 2010: 85). The period following Civil War was aptly named by Robert Watson as the era of transitional spouses, who built up foundations for the new ap-

proach to the position of the presidential spouse. First ladies of that period were generally well educated for their time (most of them attended college), more socially active, publicly visible and generally very popular. Still, deeply ingrained stereotypes concerning the role of women, very often represented especially by their husbands, prevented them from taking up any larger scale activism (Watson 1997: 810), especially in connection with controversial reform causes such as female suffrage or temperance. Such was the case of Lucy Hayes (1877-1881), the first college graduate to become first lady, or Frances Cleveland (1886-89; 1893-97) both ardent prohibitionists who, however, refused to support openly Women Christian Temperance Union (Foster 2011: 73). Frances Cleveland, nevertheless, was not afraid to promote lass controversial issues like women's education and betterment of the situation of working women (Schneider, Schneider 2010: vii).

It was only at the beginning of the 20th century, at the height of the progressive era, when the foundation of "modern first lady as an active presidential partner" (Watson 1997: 813) were built. First ladies of that period, like Helen Taft, Florence Harding, Edith Wilson, Lou Hoover were ambitious, determined and influenced their husbands' political carriers. All of them, however, were overshadowed by Eleanor Roosevelt and her social and political activism. As the first lady she did much more than any other of her predecessors or followers at this post, establishing many precedents and opening various opportunities for the wives of subsequent presidents. Urge for reform demonstrated by the progressive movement activists allowed first ladies to exercise new powers – they could openly promote some advancement or reform project, yet were very careful not to choose a controversial one As Betty Caroli points, out in the first three decades of the 20th century, "each First Lady … even the most insecure, left her mark. Together, they guaranteed that their successors would never find an easy retreat from a public role" (Caroli 2010: 119). Thus Ellen Wilson (1913-14), although spent not much longer than a year in the White House and had serious health problems, backed the campaign on housing reform and slum clearance. She personally investigated the situation in Washington slums and thanks to her engagement, in 1914 relevant legislation, known as Ellen Wilson's Bill was passed (Caroli 2010: 144). Grace Coolidge (1923-1945), because of her professional training and experience, supported education of the deaf. Lou Hoover (1929-33) generated publicity for the scouts, as she had been a prominent activist of American Girl Scouts, and during the first phase of Great Depression she promoted voluntary aid, especially National Women's Committee of Welfare and Relief Mobilization (Foster 2011: 136; Caroli 2010: 187).

Within that period the first presidential spouse also attempted to act as president's surrogate, not only in social and ceremonial occasions, as it had

been accepted thanks to precedents established by Martha Washington, but also in political and executive affairs. Edith Wilson (1916-21), the second wife of president Wilson, became the first wife of a president to travel to Europe in 1918 and in 1919, visiting troops and accompanying her husband in Versailles. Her presence among the queens and other women royalty of Europe put the position of First Lady on an equivalent standing, thus helping to define the uniquely American role in an international context. Later on she got famous because of her peculiar role of "the Secret President", "the first woman to run the government" or "Her Regency" as she acted as sole conduit between the President and his Cabinet after Wilson's stroke in 1919 (Watson 2000: 2). Her role in conducting a disinformation campaign about the actual state of the President is still a widely discussed issue (Caroli 2010; Watson 2000; Miller 2010; McCallops 2003). As the most trusted adviser and confidant even before the stroke, she became the one who discouraged the president from resigning, or at least passing some of the powers of the office to vice-president Thomas Riley Marshall. As a dutiful and caring wife, Edith Wilson supported her husband emotionally and physically, yet, she also played central role in communication between the disabled president and the whole body of his administration, leading to speculations that she might have been acting in his behalf. Although, contemporary researchers find Edith Wilson's influence on presidential administration largely overrated, as she had never shown any active interest in politics (Caroli, 2010; Miller 2010), she is, however, partly credited for convincing her husband to change his mind on woman's suffrage. It probably was not a coincidence that in 1919, after over seven decades of efforts, 19th Amendment to the Constitution was passed, finally giving women the right to vote. Wilson, who had been known for his deep reservation towards women suffrage, probably "softened on the issue" under the influence of his wife, who was supporting women's rights and who, at that time, acted as an intermediary between the president and his cabinet (Watson 2000: 3).

Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945) was the first lady who widened first ladies' scope of activism beyond recognition. Changing the role of presidential spouse she successfully extended traditional activities of her predecessors and combined them with substantive political action conducted on her own. Her immense success and popularity was probably the result of various factors. Firstly, of all the first ladies inhabiting the White House prior to her, she had the most comprehensive preparation for the role, coming from firmly established, elite, presidential family. Secondly, modeling on her uncle President Theodore Roosevelt, she was also not afraid to open for the media, holding her own press conferences and writing articles for newspapers and magazines. Thirdly, she was first lady much longer than any other woman, for

over 12 years, in unique, crucial period of American history, when so many historic changes took place. In such a momentous time, it became more acceptable for her to engage on the public arena, for various social and even political causes, many of them controversial, like prison and hospital reform, or rights of women, minorities and other underprivileged groups. Gradually she became "a practical politician and party worker, not only in behalf of her disabled husband, but because of her own interests" (Baker 1999: 47), daring to tackle such hot issues as President's plan to enlarge the Supreme Court or US preparation to war (Caroli 2010: 198), publicly presenting opinions different from her husband and openly supporting appointment of women to the positions in administration. Immense range of her activism was wittily commented upon by her equally famous successor, Hillary Clinton in the following way:

> One thing I've learned since becoming First Lady is that wherever I go, Eleanor Roosevelt has surely been there before me. I've been to farms in Iowa and factories in Michigan where Mrs. Roosevelt paid a visit a half century ago. I've been to schools and colleges named for Mrs. Roosevelt and walked the halls of hospitals she toured before I was born. Even when I go to other countries, Mrs. Roosevelt has doubtless been there first. (Clinton 1995)

Era following her term as the first lady was once again marked by return to traditional and conventional role prescribed to presidential spouse. Eleanor Roosevelt's immediate successors in the White House "did not have much of her energy, her political acumen or her ambition" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: vi). Bess Truman (1945-1953) and Mamie Eisenhower (1953-1961) definitely preferred to restrict their activities to acting as White House hostesses, providing new, modified 20th century version of the old, 19th century model of first lady as representative of the nation, attending local and national celebrations, welcoming heads of state, making public appearances in person and through the media and becoming patronesses of various, carefully chosen, possibly uncontroversial charities (Baker 1999: 45). Once the scope of first ladies' responsibilities was broadened by Eleanor Roosevelt, her followers were legitimated in assuming them and gradually even obliged to do so. From 1960s the public "grew to expect the first lady to sponsor some specific cause" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: vi). Such causes taken up by the presidential spouses, have been named by researchers on the subjects, with a common, slightly disparaging term "pet projects", denoting socially oriented but politically safe national crusades (Rosebush 1987) which are not getting particular attention and significance from the administration and are treated simply as one of the instruments of positive media and public relations with the White House (Caroli 2010: 237). Thus, beginning from Jac-

queline Kennedy (1961-1963), first ladies really embraced with their patronage some worthy cause, preferably non-controversial, fitting into "women's sphere" of interest and not associated with "strength and power in American politics" (Caroli 2010: 243). Thus, President Kennedy's wife, because of her interest in arts, decided to take up effort to restore the White House. Although seemingly innocent, the program turned out to be very controversial and severely criticized, as substantial financial resources were needed to implement it and a French designer influenced its implementation (Abbott, Rice 1998). Jacqueline Kennedy had to use all her determination to accomplish it as she had been "warned, begged and practically threatened" to give it up (Caroli 2010: 230). Despite obstacles the project was implemented and in February 1962 the American Public could watch *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* and admire new interior decoration of the White House. Lady Bird Johnson (1963-1969) worked for the environment, launching her "beautification" project and linking natural beauty with the quality of life. Pat Nixon (1969-1974) without noticeable successes tried to support the causes complementing her husband's social welfare measures program. She also promoted volunteerism and continued White House conservation and historical preservation efforts begun by Jacqueline Kennedy, adding more than 600 paintings and furnishings to the collection and enlarging access to the White House for foreign language speakers and the physically disabled (Byron 2009).

Betty Ford (1974-1977) got involved with promotion of *The Equal Rights Amendment* and generally broke up with the tradition of politically and socially "safe" issues, taking subjects from her own experience, which formerly had been taboo topics, like children's experimentation with drugs. Herself being a victim of breast cancer she also committed herself to promote *Breast Cancer Awareness* Program. Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) was another first lady who was also not afraid to take up another delicate subject, making Americans more aware of mental illnesses and developmental disabilities, getting engaged in revising the mental health program. She became honorary chair of President's Council on Mental Health, promoting *Mental Health System Act* throughout various committees and testifying in favor of increased federal spending on health programs before the Senate Resource Subcommittee. Additionally, after 1979 journey to Thailand to inspect refugee camps, she added refugee treatment and protection into her agenda (Carter 1994: 292-324).

Nancy Reagan (1981-1989) became concerned with yet another, unglamorous public problem and through her *Just Say no to Drugs* program, she was trying to bring the problem of drug abuse and anti-drug education to the public attention. In 1985 she held a conference at the White House for First

Ladies of 17 countries to focus international attention on this problem and help to promote the cause (Black 2009).

Nancy Reagan's successor Barbara Bush (1989-1993), preparing for the job of first lady for eight years as wife of vice-president, being rather traditionalistic in her approach to the role of first lady, decided to support yet another safe but important cause of universal literacy linking it with many social ills like social exclusion or homelessness. In order to promote reading habits among the youngest generations she took a step unprecedented by other first ladies, writing a book about Bush family pet dog: *Millie's Book as Dictated to Barbara Bush*, which became a bestseller. Royalties from this publication helped to finance Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy (Caroli 2010: 291). Similarly, her daughter in law, Laura Bush (2001-2009), a librarian by profession, continued to advance interests in reading programs and literacy campaigns, establishing also for that purpose, the semi-annual National Book Festival in 2001. Apart from her literary interests, she also encouraged promotion of education and women's issues, addressing for example the oppression of women and children in Afghanistan and other Taliban ruled places in the world. (*Radio Address by Mrs. Bush*).

When Hillary Clinton (1993-2001) became the first lady, she became the presidential spouse with the largest professional experience, as few presidential spouses had worked professionally after marrying, and it was usually in family business (Rosalyn Carter and Lady Bird Johnson) or in teaching (Pat Nixon). Although during the presidential campaign she was trying not to stress her professional achievements as well as interest in national and political issues, emphasizing rather her ability to combine professional carrier with the role of mother and supportive wife, when she entered the White House it became clear that as a successful, practicing lawyer she was not going to become a patron of some safe, feminine topic. Soon after inauguration it was announced that Hillary Clinton was going to work on health care reform, which was one of the central issues in her husband's presidential campaign, thus leading major reform planned by the new administration. Although in the past first ladies occasionally were responsible for developing public policy, chairing task forces and commissions e.g. Ellen Wilson's urban housing bill, Eleanor Roosevelt's prison and hospital reform and civil rights initiatives, Rosalyn's Carter – mental health issues, for the first time a presidential spouse was to become a "legislative leader, holding hearings and shaping laws" (Caroli 2010: 312). Such precedent lead to hot debates whether a first lady can be treated as "government official" and as such participate in hearings of the Task Force on Health Care Reform. Objections were raised that first lady "has been neither appointed to nor confirmed in the position" and "she had taken no oath of office and she neither holds a statutory office nor

performs statutory duties" (Caroli 2010: 310). In order to resolve the issue, a decision of federal court of appeal was needed which confirmed that there is "a longstanding tradition of public service by First Ladies (…) who have acted (albeit in the background) as advisers and personal representatives of their husbands" (Caroli 2010: 310). Although the healthcare plan failed, the cause of the failure is not so much ascribed to radicality of reform proposals (for which Hillary Clinton would be partly responsible) but loss of the Democratic majority in Congress and wrong timing of its presentation in the Senate (Navarro 2007).

Michelle Obama, current firsts lady, maybe having in mind criticism and opposition that Hillary Clinton had to face, although having professional credentials comparable to those of Hillary Clinton, did not attempt to back any controversial project. During her first term as first lady she decided to make childhood obesity and healthy eating habits her leading topic, with the goal, as set out in a report from the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, is to reduce childhood obesity from 20% to 5% by 2030 (DeNoon). She also got engaged in the "Joining Forces" program aiming at helping military families. As the second term has just started it is difficult to predict whether she is going to embrace any new, more substantive and contentious issues like gun control or immigration, which have been named as second term priorities by the president (Gutin 2013).

From the analysis of the choice of "pet causes" it is clearly visible that any activities taken by a first lady, which are perceived as invading the territory of executive power lead to suspicions and accusations that a person who "is not elected and responsible only to her husband" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: vii) wants to interfere in the activities of the government. Thus, in fear of criticism, little is revealed about the extent of political advice that presidential spouse can provide to the president. Historically, it is believed that Abigail Adams, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosalynn Carter and Hilary Clinton were their husband's most trusted advisors in political decisions.

In late 1950s and early 1960s, with rapid development of media, especially television "the role of a pleasant-looking housewife who could be a graceful hostess or accepter of bouquets became irrelevant" (Foster 2011, Introduction). Of course, a first lady is still expected to be attractive, yet, apart being a celebrity and woman icon of America, she is also expected to became "a part of the public element of the modern presidency and campaigning in America", as well as "active and public partner of the president", often surpassing "the vice president and even the most senior advisers and cabinet secretaries in terms of visibility" (Watson 1997: 813-814). Of course, presidential spouse was important for her husband's political reputation even in 18th and 19th century when women were not expected to participate in public sphere, yet

ceremonial and social functions of the first lady could have highly political dimension, as hosting foreign dignitaries and politicians could help to shape political relations, as visible from activities of Dolley Madison or Julia Grant (Foster 2011: 17-20, 65-67). However, it was not considered appropriate for first ladies or candidates for first ladies to get engaged actively and openly in the campaign in order to generate interest in and enthusiasm for the candidate. Women were not allowed to attend party conventions when they began in 1832 until the time of Eleanor Roosevelt, who was also the very first one who spoke officially at a national political convention in 1940. At that time Franklin D. Roosevelt was seeking an unprecedented third term but her task was not so much to convince Americans to re-elect FD Roosevelt, but to quell a revolt against Roosevelt's choice for vice president, Henry Wallace (Obaro 2012).

As female electoral power became more widely recognized, candidate's wives got more prominent convention roles, delivering "highly scripted, targeted speeches designed to showcase a softer side of the potential president and appeal to the niche group that isn't really a niche group: women" (Obaro 2012). This custom was initiated by was Barbara Bush, with her address at the convention in 1992, jokingly commenting on her role in the following words. "There's something not quite right here… speeches by President Ronald Reagan, President Gerald Ford, Secretary Jack Kemp, Senator Phil Graham and Barbara Bush?" (Bush 1992). In the past five presidential election cycles, speeches by first ladies or those who aspire to the position, have become almost required political discourse and highlights of the convention, even though in this task candidates' wives are expected to behave according to a certain, conventional pattern. They are not to appear overtly political so by no means are they charged with political issues or attacking the other candidate. Their task is to present themselves as supporting, wifely figures and "humanize" their husbands, giving intimate introductions and endorsements of their partners, artfully portraying them as loving, caring men, attesting that being excellent head of family the candidate will be equally good head of state. On the campaign trail and at conventions, the candidate's spouse being the human being who knows the aspirant the best, can attest that possesses qualities necessary to become president of all Americans. It is more crucial in some election years than others, as sometimes one nominee is simply less appealing on a personal level than the other – like in last year's presidential run between Mitt Romney vs. President Obama.

In the 2012 campaign both Ann Romney and Michelle Obama did not depart from the prescribed role of supporters. It is no wonder that gender role of women as wives and mothers was stressed by Ann Romney in her largely quoted words: "It's the moms of this nation – single, married, widowed –

who really hold this country together. We're the mothers, we're the wives, we're the grandmothers, we're the big sisters, we're the little sisters, we're the daughters." (Ann Romney) She has been a supportive wife all her life, who married at 19 and decided to be a stay at home mum for her 5 children. Her lack of professional experience was bitterly criticized by liberal critics for being "proud to be a Stepford Wife" (Sager) and she was portrayed as privileged and out of touch with the real world, indulging in posh past times like tennis and horse-riding, a woman who "never worked a day in her life" – Democratic lobbyist Hilary Rosen had to apologize for her words later on (Von Drehle 2012). What is striking, Michelle Obama also did not go far away from the traditional woman's gender role as well. In her speech she reminded about the couple's humble origins, their shared work ethic and the American dream, describing her husband as a grounded, devoted man driven to build better lives for American children, implying he knows more about economic challenges than a wealthy son of fortune like Mitt Romney. However, she was careful not to say a word about her own pursuits at Princeton, Harvard or in Chicago, her professional credentials of associate in the law firm specializing in marketing and intellectual property and then assistant to Chicago mayor and city's assistant commissioner of planning and development. Instead she preferred to stress her main role as "Mom-in-Chief", caring wife, successful first lady, above the partisan fray, engaged in politically safe pet projects.

Still, no matter, how much first lady or aspiring first lady would like to stay away from political debate, events from her life, seemingly unconnected with politics can lead to political debate. In 1912 campaign such an issue was Multiple Sclerosis which Ann Romney suffers from. MS drug therapy turned out to be a touchy subject because the medicines are extremely expensive and because of these costs access to therapy slowing down the development of the disease is uneven as some U.S. insurers put a lifetime cap on the amount that patients can spend on these drugs. When in one of the interviews Romney advised her fellow MS patients "to get on medications because the medications now are so effective in reducing symptoms" (Von Drehle 2012) a thorny debate over health care spending began.

No statistics have ever been compiled to tell us how many people vote for or against a candidate based on their spouse; unless that spouse generates considerable controversy by what they say or do. It is believed by political analysts that perceptions of the candidate's wife are simply one of several components folded into the overall approval of a candidate. Current form of the office of first lady has been largely created by choices and precedents set by all previous presidential spouses or women asked to take up the position in place of and ailing or dead presidential wife. Holding such a position, each first lady has always been in the limelight, and consequently under particular

scrutiny, so women holding the post were in a way forced to watch their every step and hold their tongues much more carefully than any other woman in the country. Simply, it was much easier for a first lady to transgress the generally accepted boundaries of the proper and improper behavior. Still, as Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider aptly noted in their first ladies' biographical dictionary, paradoxically, presidential spouses, who concentrated only on family obligations and social duties were highly regarded in their own time, yet historically fell into obscurity, whereas those who in their own times stirred criticism for being too active and independent are currently recognizable and widely admired (Schneider, Schneider 2010: x-xi). In the 21st century, "with multiplication of women's roles and choices" (Schneider, Schneider 2010: ix), it seem indispensable to provide more clearly defined legal rules outlining duties, responsibilities and obligations of a presidential spouse, with special emphasis on such issues as: remuneration for the work, possibility to advise president on policies or pursue her own carrier when her husband is in office. All these issues will probably be answered very promptly, when the first woman becomes President.

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