



# AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SPOUSES

THE PUBLIC'S PERSPECTIVE

*Laurel Elder, Brian Frederick & Barbara Burrell*



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The Public's Perspective

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## PREFACE

First ladies in the United States have been the subject of numerous historical, social, and biographical works. Political scientists, however, have only marginally contributed to this literature. But as the women's rights movement has challenged conventional conceptions of women's roles in the political life of the nation and as an ever increasing number of women are seeking political leadership positions, the idea of a first lady engaged only in traditional activities has become an anomaly in the political world. Her role in the political process has increasingly become the subject of discussion and debate. The women who would be first lady and those women who have actually attained this position have increasingly had professional careers of their own and have become actively engaged in the campaign process as advisers to their spouses and as surrogates on the campaign trail. But traditional conceptions of their involvement in a presidential administration have constrained their activism in the White House. The idea that this country may soon have a man as first spouse has also stimulated conversations about the constraints and old-fashioned ideas surrounding this position.

As the political landscape has changed quite dramatically over the past few decades, several developments convinced the authors of this book that the time was right to undertake a project, more systematically exploring public opinion about first spouses. Political science has steadily become a more diverse field, recognizing the need to more fully explore issues of gender in politics, including how the public views the spouses of presidential candidates. The changing dynamics in the field has led to important scholarship examining first ladies and presidential candidate spouses by

esteemed political scientists including Barbara Burrell, Marianne Borelli, and Lauren Wright. While each of their books has investigated the topic in varying ways, they have all contributed to a significant advancement of knowledge in this area, elevating it to greater prominence in the field.

Additionally, several major political firsts in recent years have magnified the significance of examining these political actors' public roles. In 2009 Michelle Obama became the first African American to serve as first lady. During the 2012 election Ann Romney became the first Mormon spouse of a major party presidential candidate. In 2016 former President Bill Clinton became the first male spouse of a presidential candidate nominated by one of the two major parties when Hillary Clinton secured the nomination of the Democratic Party. These high-profile events sparked a flood of articles, books, and other news features in the popular press about what these developments mean for American politics and society. Consideration of presidential candidate spouses should no longer be an afterthought among serious political observers.

Given this newfound interest in the life partners of presidential candidates, the authors of this study believed the time was right to coauthor a book that applied a more systematic examination than members of the media or punditry could provide. All three authors of this book have spent large portions of their career studying various aspects of how gender influences the American political process. Another central focus of the authors' research agenda has been investigating the political attitudes and behavior of the American public. This combination of scholarly interests led the authors to decide that a comprehensive account of public opinion toward presidential candidate spouses was a necessary addition to the research in this field of study.

What distinguishes this book from much of the previous scholarship is that it focuses exclusively on the American public's perspectives toward presidential candidate spouses. As the book explains in subsequent chapters, the role of the presidential candidate spouse in the US political process is central to appreciating how modern presidential campaigns function. Equally as critical in a democratic political system is understanding how the people themselves feel about various political actors including individuals who aspire to be first ladies or first gentlemen. What are the expectations the American people have for presidential candidate spouses? How have they reacted to the women and the men who have served in this role? These are just a few of the questions that this book seeks to answer. It does so through the combination of a theoretical framework the authors refer

to as the “New Traditionalism” and an extensive collection survey data asking the American public about their feelings regarding the spouses of presidential candidates. These theoretical and empirical contributions go beyond what other books on the topic have attempted.

The finished product is a reflection both on the individuals who seek to become the first lady or gentleman and on the American public and its expectations for gender equity, campaign strategy, public policy-making, and the expectations for married couples in contemporary society. After reading it, the audience should get a more complete sense of not just how people view individuals like Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush, Michelle Obama, Ann Romney, Bill Clinton, and Melania Trump, but also the bigger picture of how the public reacts to the behavior and actions of presidential candidate spouses in a more generalized way. In addition, to summarizing and contextualizing the evidence that has been collected in the past, the book also provides insight into what the future holds for public perceptions of candidate spouses. What follows is the definitive account of how the US citizens perceive presidential candidate spouses in the modern era of American politics, stretching from 1988 to 2016 and beyond.

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# CONTENTS

1	An Introduction to American Presidential Candidate Spouses	1
2	Understanding Public Opinion Toward Presidential Candidate Spouses	21
3	Hillary Clinton Versus Barbara Bush: Tradition Meets Change in the 1992 Presidential Campaign	51
4	Historic Firsts: Public Opinion Toward Michelle Obama and Ann Romney in the 2012 Presidential Election	79
5	Breaking with the Past: Public Opinion Toward Melania Trump and Bill Clinton in the 2016 Election	107
6	The Future of Public Opinion and Presidential Candidate Spouses	135
	Index	155

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Percentage of the American public believing it is important for husbands/wives to campaign on behalf of presidential candidates	27
Fig. 2.2	Favorable and unfavorable averages of presidential candidate spouses, 1988–2016	30
Fig. 2.3	Adjusted favorable averages of presidential candidate spouses, 1988–2016	30
Fig. 2.4	Change in average favorability ratings for incumbent first ladies compared to first campaign	32
Fig. 2.5	Partisan polarization of attitudes toward presidential candidate spouses	41
Fig. 2.6	“Independence”—net favorable ratings of presidential candidates and their spouses	44
Fig. 3.1	Barbara Bush’s favorable/unfavorable ratings across the 1992 campaign	57
Fig. 3.2	Hillary Clinton’s favorable/unfavorable ratings across the 1992 campaign	57
Fig. 3.3	Mean feeling thermometer ratings of Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton among demographic and political groups from 1992 ANES	61
Fig. 4.1	Michelle Obama’s favorable/unfavorable ratings over 2012 campaign	82
Fig. 4.2	Ann Romney’s favorable/unfavorable ratings over 2012 campaign	83
Fig. 4.3	Average favorable and adjusted favorable ratings for incumbent first ladies and non-incumbent presidential candidate spouses 1988–2016	85

Fig. 4.4	Mean feeling thermometer ratings for Michelle Obama and Ann Romney among demographic and political groups from 2012 ANES	88
Fig. 5.1	Melania Trump's favorable/unfavorable ratings over the 2016 campaign	113
Fig. 5.2	Bill Clinton's favorable/unfavorable ratings over the 2016 campaign	114
Fig. 5.3	Percent of respondents expressing a favorable opinion toward Bill Clinton and Melania Trump among demographic and political groups in the 2016 election	120

# LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Public opinion on the appropriate role of the president's spouse	24
Table 2.2	Polls conducted about presidential candidate spouses during the campaign season, 1988–2016	35
Table 3.1	Pollster inquiries about presidential candidate spouses during the 1992 campaign season	59
Table 3.2	Regression models predicting respondents' feeling thermometer rating of Barbara Bush in the 1992 election	62
Table 3.3	Regression models predicting respondents' feeling thermometer rating of Hillary Clinton in the 1992 election	63
Table 4.1	Pollster inquiries about presidential candidate spouses during the 2012 campaign season	86
Table 4.2	Regression models predicting respondents' feeling thermometer rating of Michelle Obama's 2012 election	89
Table 4.3	Regression models predicting respondents' feeling thermometer rating of Ann Romney's 2012 election	90
Table 5.1	Pollster inquiries about presidential candidate spouses during the 2016 campaign season	112
Table 5.2	Logistic regression models predicting respondents' favorability rating toward Bill Clinton	122
Table 5.3	Logistic regression models predicting respondents' favorability rating toward Melania Trump	123



## CHAPTER 1

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# An Introduction to American Presidential Candidate Spouses

The dividing line between the private and public lives of national-level candidates in modern political life has virtually vanished. In an era of social media, 24-hour cable news coverage, and rapidly changing journalistic norms candidates are evaluated on more than policy records and traditional qualifications for public office. They also are assessed on various aspects of their personal life. Whether they like it or not, candidates for high office in the United States, especially those individuals who aspire to the presidency, must confront the reality that they are judged in part by the company they keep, including family and personal friends. The individual closest to them, drawing the most scrutiny, is often their spouse.

Presidential candidate spouses are thrust into the public spotlight not because they are personally seeking a public platform or political power, but on the basis of a very private act of who they married. Former First Lady Laura Bush underscores the personal origins of the position of first ladies and would-be first ladies by remarking that “We are elected by one man” (The White House, Office of First Lady 2014).

Despite the personal origins of would-be first ladies and first gentlemen, the position of presidential candidate spouse has become undeniably political and influential. While the spouses of candidates have long been active in their husbands’ campaigns for the White House, going as far back as the nineteenth century, it is only from 1992 on that presidential candidate spouses have come to play an especially prominent and strategic role in presidential campaigns (Vigil 2014). It has now become the norm for presidential

candidate spouses to pursue highly visible, very active, and strategically crafted campaign schedules—giving speeches, raising money, and appealing to key voting blocs (Burrell 2001; MacManus and Quecan 2008; Wright 2016). The public pays close attention to the activities of candidate spouses, feeling that it is through their actions and statements that they can better understand the genuine character and essence of the presidential candidates. This visibility and attention sparks the interest of voters and puts the candidate's spouse under the microscope of the public's gaze.

During her speech at the 2016 Democratic Convention, former First Lady Michelle Obama acknowledged how conscious she was of this scrutiny, even among the youngest Americans, remarking that “With every word we utter, with every action we take, we know our kids are watching us. We as parents are their most important role models. And let me tell you, Barack and I take that same approach to our jobs as president and first lady because we know that our words and actions matter, not just to our girls, but the children across this country, kids who tell us I saw you on TV, I wrote a report on you for school” (*Washington Post* Transcript 2016).

The larger question that arises from Michelle's Obama's recognition of this public spotlight is not only how young people view her as a role model, but also how the entire population views her and other spouses of candidates running for president. Why does the public view some presidential candidate spouses more favorably than others? What factors systematically underlie public perceptions of these high-profile figures as they carry out a role precariously situated between the public and private spheres? This book seeks to answer these fundamental questions through a multifaceted exploration of public opinion on would-be first ladies and gentleman over the past three decades, including an in-depth focus on candidate spouses in three key presidential elections: 1992, 2012, and 2016.

The period after the 2016 election and Michelle Obama's eight years as first lady are particularly important times for assessing public opinion toward presidential candidate spouses. During the 2016 presidential election, Melania Trump and Bill Clinton proved to be major departures from typical candidate spouses, albeit in markedly different ways, much as Hillary Clinton was in 1992 by going beyond the more traditional surrogate role, making it clear she would have an active policy role in the White House. Assessing public opinion of candidate spouses from 1988 through 2016, as this book does, allows us to identify key areas of stability and change in Americans' attitudes toward candidate spouses as the public is confronted with presidential candidate spouses who not only offer different conceptions of the role, as was the case with Hillary Clinton in 1992,

but also embody historic firsts—the first African American spouse in the case of Michelle Obama, the first Mormon spouse in the case of Ann Romney, and the first male spouse in the case of Bill Clinton.

## PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SPOUSES AS POLITICAL ACTORS AND POTENT SYMBOLS

At first glance it might not be obvious why a book on public opinion toward presidential candidate spouses is necessary. One might question whether public perceptions toward individuals aspiring for a position with no formal constitutional recognition is a wise investment of scholarly time and resources. Indeed, if voters are officially electing candidates for president and not the individuals they are married to, why should anyone care how citizens feel about them? This sentiment is certainly understandable. Despite these concerns, there are several notable reasons why scholars and other observers of American politics should want to know more about how the public evaluates the spouses of those candidates seeking the country's highest elective office.

The first reason is that presidential candidate spouses are highly visible and effective political actors. Many candidate spouses throughout history have taken part in presidential campaigns, but since the modern era of candidate-centered rather than party-centered campaigns their role has become even more vital and prominent (Burrell 2001). It is now typical for the spouses of candidates to make hundreds of appearances during presidential campaigns, to headline fundraisers, and to receive intense media attention in both news outlets and entertainment-oriented venues (MacManus and Quecan 2008; Stokes 2005). Candidate spouses have become important and prominent surrogates for the presidential candidates on the campaign trail (Burrell 2001). Thus, the public has many opportunities to learn about and develop views on the candidate spouses.

In her 2016 book, *On Behalf of the President*, political scientist Lauren Wright offers compelling empirical evidence that candidate spouses are not only prominent campaign surrogates, but are actually the most valuable presidential campaign asset. Candidate spouses are effective surrogates for a variety of reasons. One is that candidate spouses have the ability to “go personal” in a way no other campaign surrogates can (Wright 2016). Candidate spouses are uniquely positioned to draw on intimate, familial, and day-to-day experiences to give the nation a sense of who the

candidate is as a person, as a father or as a mother, as a husband or as a wife, and in many other aspects of their life outside of the public's view. Thus, candidate spouses can vouch for the candidate's suitability to be president in ways no other campaign surrogate can.

There are numerous examples in recent history of these personal testimonials, a few of which are highlighted here. Ann Romney was credited with humanizing her husband, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, during the 2012 presidential campaign. Mitt Romney had extensive credentials and leadership experience, but many observers questioned whether he could relate to the everyday challenges of Americans, due to his enormous wealth and his family's political connections. In her 2012 Republican Convention speech, Ann Romney spoke about how she met Mitt Romney at a school dance, why she fell in love with him, and how they had a real marriage and faced real problems together including her battles with multiple sclerosis (MS) and breast cancer. She concluded her speech by saying that similar to Mitt Romney bringing her safely home from the school dance, he would take America to a better place. She used her intimate knowledge of Mitt Romney as a suitor and a husband to make him seem more likeable and relatable to the public (Vigil 2014).

Melania Trump struck a similar tone in her infrequent campaign appearances on behalf of her husband Donald Trump. On November 3, 2016, before a crowd in the swing state of Pennsylvania, Melania Trump stated, "I come here today to talk about my husband, Donald, and his deep love and respect for this country, and all of its people. I have come here to talk about this man I have known for 18 years. And I have come here today, to talk about our partnership, our family, and what I know for sure in my heart about this man, who will make America great again" (Zorthian 2016). During the campaign, Melania Trump also drew on her personal knowledge of her husband to counter allegations that Donald Trump had sexually harassed women.

The 2016 election demonstrated that the role of humanizing presidential candidates is not a task relegated to female spouses only. On the contrary, Bill Clinton played a similar role during his wife's presidential campaign. As Lauren Wright describes it, Bill Clinton attempted to do for his spouse, Hillary Clinton, "what first ladies have done for decades: reveal the human face of the candidate through charming anecdotes and personal information" (Wright 2016, 8). During his Democratic Convention speech, he shared an anecdote about when he and Hillary dropped off their daughter, Chelsea, at college for the first time. "There I was, in a



trance, just staring out the window trying not to cry and there was Hillary on her hands and knees, desperately looking for one more drawer to put the liner paper in. Finally, Chelsea took charge and told us ever-so-gently that it was time for us to go. So, we closed a big chapter in the most important work of our lives. As you will see Thursday night, when Chelsea speaks, Hillary has done a pretty fine job of being a mother.” In this speech, Bill Clinton shed light on the personal side of Hillary Clinton that no other supporter or member of her campaign could replicate.

Presidential candidate spouses are also important agents in the campaign because they are able to appeal to different and frequently broader audiences than their spouses. Presidential campaigns understand the value of candidate spouses and have deployed them strategically, crafting the timing and nature of appearances to maximize their impact (Burrell 2001; MacManus and Quecan 2008; Wright 2016). In 1992, for instance, Barbara Bush was more popular among elderly people, females, and better educated Americans than her husband, George H. W. Bush, which guided the way the campaign used her star power during the campaign (Mughan and Burden 1995, 145). In 2016, Hillary Clinton’s campaign dispatched Bill Clinton to rural towns across America to appeal to white men, a group the campaign presumed he would be able to connect with more effectively than the candidate herself (Karni 2016). As MacManus and Quecan (2008) argue, the performance of presidential spouses on the campaign trail has the potential to influence the success or failure of their spouses’ campaigns.

One of the most prominent examples of a presidential candidate’s spouse being deployed to target a specific voting demographic was President George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign team’s highly visible efforts to woo female voters. With an enormously popular profile, it was logical for the campaign staff to rely on Laura Bush to play an instrumental role in its strategy to close the gender gap. Burrell’s (2005) review of the 2004 presidential election noted that “First Lady Laura Bush was central to the specific appeals the Bush campaign made to women. She appeared in 30-second ads strategically placed on women-oriented Web sites” (42). These “ads included Laura standing next to the President as he announced that he ‘approved the ad’” (42). This strategy proved successful as George W. Bush’s support among women increased by four percentage points in the 2004 election compared to 2000.

Presidential candidate spouses can also influence perceptions of their spouses among voters. Borrelli (2001) has argued that candidate spouses have the power to enhance the image of their partners on the campaign