The Evolving Role of the First Lady

Introduction

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.

Women in Politics

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. O’Connell and Margheim explained:

The First Lady is not an elected position and purely ceremonial. However, First Ladies have always maintained a prominent position in American society. The First Lady’s role has changed in the centuries since Martha Washington. First, she is the official hostess of the White House and its social gatherings. She also attends official ceremonies and state functions, either with her husband or in his stead. However, some First Ladies have functioned as political operatives and activists in their own right.

History of First Ladies

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 an “excellent companion who is familiar with my ways and has always supported me” in his nomination speech. Valdes pointed out that the First Ladies are an integral part of a presidency, whether the public realizes it or not. “It would be wrong to assume that the First Lady’s position is exclusively ceremonial.”

Role of First Ladies

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 countries/regions 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. Stewart 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 countries/regions 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, O’Connell and Margheim pointed out, “but the issues that America faces, including economic, environmental, and societal problems, have led voters to insist that a First Lady play an increasingly informed and active role.” Also, the First Lady must be well-informed, articulate, and persuasive, and must function in a political role without upstaging the president, O’Connell and Margheim added.

Power of First Ladies

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. O’Connell and Margheim explained:

Despite having come to expect a more visible role for the First Lady, many Americans have expressed extreme ambivalence at the power resting in an unelected position, especially one held by a female. Abigail Adams, Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and other First Ladies have been criticized for having too strong an influence on the political operations of the countries/regions.

In fact, the less power she claims, the more power she yields, Steiner said of the First Lady’s role. Stewart made a similar observation, writing that First Ladies could advocate feminine concerns or issues without receiving much public criticism. However, Stewart 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.

Conclusion

In addition, the First Lady may also harm her own credibility and popularity by taking publicly unpopular stands, Stewart added. O’Connell and Margheim pointed out that First Ladies represent “the fundamental conflict between gender roles in American society.”