

Why We Love Michelle: Understanding Public Support for First Lady Michelle Obama

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After eight years as the first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama left the White House beloved in the eyes of many Americans. Being well liked by Americans is not in and of itself an unusual phenomenon for first ladies. What is remarkable about the love so many Americans expressed toward First Lady Michelle Obama is that she was able to maintain high favorable evaluations through a period of political, social, and electoral acrimony that made high approval ratings for national political figures increasingly unlikely. By drawing on a wealth of aggregate data drawn from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives and individual-level public opinion data drawn from the 2012 American National Election Studies survey as well as original survey data, this article identifies several important forces behind Michelle Obama's popularity.

Keywords: First ladies, presidential candidate spouses, race and politics, public opinion, gender and politics, symbolic representation

After eight years serving as the first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama left the White House beloved in the eyes of most Americans. According to Gallup, her favorability rating was 69%, well above that of her husband, President Barack Obama, as well as virtually all other national political figures (McCarthy 2017). Americans' affection for Michelle Obama was not limited to a sense of nostalgia as she and her husband were about to leave the White House. On the contrary, her favorability ratings remained in the high 60s throughout her tenure in the national spotlight (McCarthy 2017).

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Since first ladies have become objects of interest in public opinion surveys, being well liked by the American public is not in and of itself an unusual phenomenon for them. Michelle Obama's predecessor, First Lady Laura Bush, also enjoyed high favorable ratings throughout her husband's two terms as president. Although polls were conducted less frequently during her tenure, Barbara Bush retains the status as the most beloved first lady of the modern era (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018, chap. 2). On the other hand, popularity is not automatically inherited with the title of first lady. During her eight years in the role, Hillary Clinton experienced the lowest favorability ratings of modern first ladies (Pryby and Scavo 2001; Troy 2006). Her approval ratings even dipped below the approval ratings of her husband, President Bill Clinton, an unusual development for a first lady (Burrell 2000, 2001). First Lady Melania Trump has also struggled to win the public's approval (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018).

What is remarkable about the goodwill so many Americans express toward First Lady Michelle Obama is that she was able to maintain high favorable evaluations through a period of political, social, and electoral acrimony that made high approval ratings for national political figures increasingly unlikely. Throughout President Obama's two terms in office, our nation saw greater partisan and ideological polarization (Abramowitz 2018; Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Campbell 2016; Jacobson 2017; Webster and Abramowitz 2017), continuing declines in trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), increasing income inequality (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016), and negative reactions among large pockets of Americans to the changing social and demographic landscape of American society (Jones 2017; Parker and Barreto 2013). Despite these structural factors, as well as Michelle Obama's prominent role as a campaign surrogate in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, she remained a highly esteemed national figure.

Another reason Michelle Obama's warm embrace by the American public is remarkable is that she was the first black American to assume the position of first lady, and she held this position during a period of considerable racial acrimony (Tesler 2016; Tesler and Sears 2010). As a prominent African American woman, she faced significant obstacles in winning the support of the American public, including gendered racism and racialized sexism (Junn 2017; Simien 2007; Smooth 2013). In presenting herself to the public, Michelle Obama had to contend with the negative stereotypes all too commonly invoked about women of color

(Guerrero 2011; Harris-Perry 2011; Hayden 2017). As Melissa Harris-Perry observes in her book *Sister Citizen*, Michelle Obama had to carefully and strategically craft a public persona to counter harmful images of African American women, including conversations “about her body, discussions about her role as mother, and speculations about her marriage” (2011, 277).

Michelle Obama’s popularity is also surprising because she did not automatically embody the default image Americans have tended to associate with first ladies (Borrelli 2001; Burrell 1999, 2000; Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011; Stokes 2005). In their effort to explain what the American public desires in first ladies, Charles Tien, Regan Checchia, and Arthur H. Miller state that “in short, it is acceptable to be a full-time wife and mother, hostess of the White House, supporter of feel-good causes, and goodwill ambassador to the world who stays out of policy” (1999, 155). Along similar lines, political scientist Kelly Dittmar (2015) writes, “The nation not only elects a president to the White House, but also a ‘first family’ that has long been expected to fit a ‘traditional’ American ideal in image, structure and relational styles.” By enjoying a high-powered professional career before becoming first lady and presenting an autonomous rather than a deferential image, Michelle Obama implicitly and explicitly challenged several of these traditional ideas (Cottle 2012; Guerrero 2011).

How was Michelle Obama able to become and remain such a beloved figure throughout her time as first lady despite the social, political, and cultural headwinds she faced? What were the sources of her popularity? In this article, we draw on public opinion data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives, the 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey, and original survey data to argue that Michelle Obama’s deft ability to navigate the public’s desire for “new traditionalism” — expectations that she must simultaneously play a traditionally supportive yet highly visible role — was the main driver of her popularity. By actively supporting her husband’s campaigns, visibly championing causes within the traditional sphere of women’s activities, and crafting an image as a good mom and a good role model for women, Michelle Obama was able to accumulate a formidable incumbency advantage and appeal outside partisan lines more effectively than other national political figures. This article also argues that Michelle Obama’s popularity was bolstered by high levels of support from groups that felt symbolically represented by her. The analysis of public opinion toward Michelle Obama presented here reveals insights

into the traditional yet evolving expectations Americans have of first ladies, as well as the ways first ladies can provide meaningful representation for groups historically marginalized in our national politics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The central theoretical framework guiding our analysis is “new traditionalism,” which we argue is a set of expectations Americans now have for first ladies and presidential candidate spouses. The “traditional” piece of new traditionalism refers to the reality that despite many important advances toward gender equality, the American public still prefers a traditional first lady who supports her husband, embraces her role as a mother, and does not play an active role in making government policy (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018; Stokes 2005). A clear majority of the public, 78%, believe it is inappropriate for a first lady to hold an official advisory role in the president’s office, and a smaller majority think that it is inappropriate for the president’s spouse to hold even an unofficial and unpaid position in the president’s office.¹ About half of Americans think it is not appropriate for a president’s spouse to continue her career while in the White House or talk about her own accomplishments while campaigning for her spouse.²

The “new” part of new traditionalism refers to the public’s expectation that first ladies be an active and visible presence on the campaign trail on behalf of their spouses and that they will take on high-profile roles once in office. While the public does not want the president’s spouse to be an official White House adviser, the public does expect the presidential spouse to be visible in carrying out the ceremonial responsibilities of the job, doing good works on behalf of the nation, and helping the president win reelection. Polling data reveal that Americans are nearly unanimous in thinking it is appropriate for the president’s spouse to act as the official hostess at White House events and to champion a nonpartisan cause such as mental health, childhood obesity, or literacy.³ Similarly, according to original survey data collected in

1. Gallup/USA *Today* poll, September 2004 (survey question), USGALLUP.04SEPT013.R35F, Gallup Organization, obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL.

2. According to the 2004 USA *Today*/Gallup poll, 50% thought it was appropriate and 47% thought it was inappropriate for the first lady to hold a paid job in the private sector. According to original survey data collected September 15–17, 2017, in a Gfk/Knowledge Networks nationally representative poll of 1,000 respondents, 46% thought it was inappropriate for presidential spouses to talk about their own accomplishments while campaigning for their spouse.

3. Gallup/USA *Today* poll, September 2004.

September 2017 by Laurel Elder, Brian Frederick, and Barbara Burrell (2018), 68% of Americans believe it is important or very important for the wives or husbands of presidential candidates to campaign on behalf of their spouses. This belief stems from the unique role a spouse can play as a surrogate on the campaign trail. Few other supporters can offer credible personal testimonials on behalf the presidential candidate in a way a spouse can, and the public craves hearing this firsthand validation.

In summary, new traditionalism posits that first ladies who put their families ahead of their own career goals, emphasize their work as mothers, avoid policy involvement, and pursue a high-profile schedule focused on feel-good causes and supportive activities are rewarded with high public approval, and those who transgress these expectations are punished in terms of public support. In this article, we draw on public opinion data to argue that Michelle Obama was able to excel on both the new and traditional dimensions of new traditionalism. Projecting an image of a traditional first lady was challenging for Michelle Obama given her career history and status as the first black presidential candidate spouse in a country where negative stereotypes surrounding black women are prevalent (Harris-Perry 2011). Nevertheless, Michelle Obama recognized the public's preference for tradition and adeptly crafted her image as first lady to fit within those expectations. By giving up her career, consistently emphasizing her role as "mom-in-chief," and refraining from political or policy influence (Guerrero 2011; Hayden 2017; Kahl 2009; Vigil 2014, 2019 Wright 2016), Michelle Obama was able to embody traditional expectations and reap the benefits in terms of public support. Thus, even though Michelle Obama challenged some aspects of the traditional *image* of presidential candidate spouses through her race and "modern, striving, edgy, ironic" personality (Cottle 2012), she attracted some level of bipartisan approval because of her decision to *behave* in a traditional manner.

Michelle Obama also understood the "new" part of new traditionalism, the public's desire for first ladies to be highly visible, and fulfilled these expectations as well. She served as a vocal presence for Barack Obama's candidacy, testifying to his dedication as a husband and father, which she argued would translate to his performance as president (Block and Haynes 2014). Had she not been willing to perform this visible role, Michelle Obama would have defied a key component of "new traditionalism" and her popularity likely would have suffered, as has been the case for First Lady Melania Trump (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018).

The other theoretical framework we employ in this essay is symbolic representation. Studies exploring the concept of symbolic representation show that a candidate's gender, race, and the intersection of gender and race can empower and mobilize voters in elections (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Dolan 2008; Mansbridge 1999; Philpot and Walton 2007; Simien 2016; Smooth 2011). In this article, we apply the concepts of intersectionality and symbolic representation to the study of first ladies. We draw on public opinion data to argue that First Lady Michelle Obama's highly visible role provided a particularly meaningful connection to national-level politics for historically marginalized groups including women and African Americans and, importantly, at the intersection of these two groups, African American women (Brown 2014; Smooth 2013). In turn, these groups viewed Michelle Obama particularly favorably and attached broader significance to her presence as first lady than did other groups of Americans. While Jonathan Knuckey and Myunghee Kim (2016) show that those holding racist views and negative racial stereotypes viewed First Lady Michelle Obama less warmly, we show that a key engine behind Michelle Obama's strong approval ratings were distinctively warm feelings from women, African Americans, and African American women, groups that had not previously seen people who look like them occupy prominent roles in the American political system.

POLLING INQUIRIES, NEW TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS, AND SUPPORT FOR MICHELLE OBAMA

Drawing on the new traditional framework, we argue that polling organizations ask more questions about first ladies when they act in ways that violate traditional expectations of this role — for example, by attempting to influence political decisions/policy making or by becoming embroiled in scandals. A comparison of the number and nature of the inquiries that pollsters made about Michelle Obama compared with her predecessors, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, who also served in this position for eight years, and a preliminary analysis of polling inquiries about First Lady Melania Trump, reveal that Michelle Obama (as well as Laura Bush) was particularly adept at presenting herself within traditional expectations (Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011; Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018).

According to the Roper Center database, from January 20, 1993, through January 20, 2001, pollsters asked a total of 1,277 questions about Hillary

Clinton.⁴ A small percentage of those inquiries were directed at her 2000 campaign for the U.S. Senate, but even with such questions removed, 1,211 inquiries remained. The most common question asked about all first ladies, including Hillary Clinton, is some variation of whether Americans have a favorable/unfavorable or positive/negative view of the first lady. Beyond these standard assessment questions, the major themes in the polls about Hillary Clinton revolved around various scandals and other ways Hillary Clinton defied traditional expectations of first ladies. There were 286 questions about her involvement in the Whitewater real estate scandal and 35 questions concerning Monica Lewinsky. There were 83 questions asking about Hillary Clinton's involvement with health care or other policy matters and 63 questions concerning her "influence" within the Clinton administration. On five separate occasions across her tenure as first lady, pollsters queried Americans as to whether Hillary Clinton was "too pushy."

In stark contrast to Hillary Clinton, First Lady Laura Bush exemplified the concept of new traditionalism; she embraced a traditionally feminine and supportive role but was also quite active and visible, actually giving more speeches as first lady than Hillary Clinton gave when she was in the role (Wright 2016). Pollsters responded by asking only 84 questions about Laura Bush across her eight years as first lady. Of those questions, the vast majority were variations on the basic favorability question. The handful of questions concerning other topics were benign and/or focused on contrasting Laura Bush with Hillary Clinton. For example, in 2002, pollsters asked, "Would you rather spend your summer vacation with Laura Bush or Hillary Clinton?" (42% said Laura Bush and 23% said Hillary Clinton). In a complete turnaround from Hillary Clinton, pollsters asked only three questions about Laura Bush's "influence" and only one question touching on policy. The question about policy is telling as it concerned whether the public felt Laura Bush had more or less influence on policy compared with previous first ladies, and 61% responded "less influence." Pollsters asked no questions relating to scandals or controversies. In the end, Laura Bush's new traditional performance as first lady protected her against negative media attention as well as being a source of pollster inquiries.

In contrast to her predecessors, pollsters asked 183 questions about Michelle Obama during her eight years in the White House. While that

4. Although the Roper Center archives most national polls, its archives are not exhaustive; therefore the statistics used here should be viewed as reasonable proxies for the relative amount of polling attention the first ladies received rather than definitive numbers.

is 100 more than were asked about Laura Bush, it is dramatically fewer than the 1,000-plus questions asked about First Lady Hillary Clinton. Thus, despite the historic, barrier-breaking nature of her first ladyship, Michelle Obama falls much closer to Laura Bush than Hillary Clinton on the spectrum of pollster and media interest. As the first black woman to assume the role, Michelle Obama had more social and racial challenges to overcome in dealing with the public spotlight, yet her adherence to the new traditionalist framework enabled her counter negative stereotypes and escape much of the fallout Hillary Clinton suffered for deviating from traditional norms. It was likely even more crucial for Michelle Obama to embrace and skillfully pull off the new traditionalist approach to serving as first lady because she may have faced an even greater backlash for failing to conform to these expectations as a result of her race.

The tailored questions that pollsters asked (or did not ask) about Michelle Obama further underscore her successful adherence to new traditionalism. First, similar to Laura Bush, there were no questions about scandals or serious controversies. There was one question asking how much people had heard of President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama meeting with the Queen of England in 2009. At this meeting, Michelle Obama earned headlines by hugging the Queen — a departure from protocol but not rising to the level of serious controversy. During the 2008 campaign, pollsters asked one question about whether respondents had heard about Michelle Obama's statement that this was the first time in her life that she was really proud of her country, which did emerge as a controversy; however, this happened prior to her tenure in the White House (Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011). Thus, similar to Laura Bush, Michelle Obama as first lady was successful in steering clear of scandals as well as saying or doing anything controversial during her time in office.

Moreover, Michelle Obama was careful to remain far removed from policy and political advising. Her success in this regard is once again reflected in the lack of pollster inquiries on these topics. Over her eight years as first lady, pollsters only inquired once about her connection with policy or her influence. Soon after she assumed the title of first lady in January 2009, pollsters asked, "How much influence do you think Michelle Obama will have on policy matters in the White House?" No other question along these lines was asked during the entirety of the Obama administration.

Polls also reveal Michelle Obama's success at carrying out the "new" component of new traditionalism. Michelle Obama was active and

visible, garnering high levels of name recognition while first lady, yet she confined her actions to championing nonpartisan and feel-good causes — advocating for children’s health, mentoring young women, and supporting military families (Wright 2016) — activities the public is nearly unanimous in viewing as highly appropriate for first ladies. In her first year in the White House, pollsters asked Americans how much, if anything, they had heard about Michelle Obama starting a vegetable garden on the White House grounds; 60% indicated they had heard a lot or a little about it. In 2011, the *Washington Post* asked how much people had heard about Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign against childhood obesity. Most Americans, 83%, had heard about the campaign. This widespread recognition is attributable in part to a savvy marketing campaign orchestrated by the White House and the first lady that featured LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and other stars of the National Basketball Association to encourage young people to exercise more frequently and make healthier eating choices (Hoff 2014).

As of this writing, Melania Trump had only held the position of first lady for less than two years, yet a look at pollster inquiries about her is telling. Since becoming first lady, there have been only 10 poll questions asked about her that are archived at the Roper Center, which puts her on track to have even fewer polling inquiries than the noncontroversial Laura Bush. The small number of polling inquiries is reflective of her unusually low-profile role combined with her clear distance from policy, an emphasis on motherhood, and her stated desire to be a traditional first lady (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018, chap. 6). The two questions out of these 10 that are not generic measures of favorability focus on ways her time as first lady has been untraditional. More specifically, these two questions concern reports of Donald Trump’s sexual relationships with other women during his marriage to Melania; one of these polling inquiries specifically asked Americans whether Melania Trump should leave her husband. Similar to the questions asked about Hillary Clinton regarding her husband’s relationship with Monica Lewinsky, these pollster inquiries highlight the way the marriage of President Trump and his wife violates the traditional expectations Americans desire to see in the first family (Dittmar 2015). In contrast, Michelle Obama worked consciously to dispel any questions about the stability of her marriage to Barack Obama (Harris-Perry 2011), resulting in a dearth of public survey questions probing this topic or any other scandal during her tenure as first lady.

EMBODYING TRADITIONAL WOMANHOOD: MOTHERHOOD, ROLE MODELS, AND FASHION

A key element of the new traditional expectations of first ladies is their willingness to embody the historic ideals of American womanhood — putting their children and family first, acting as role models for women, and doing all this while looking glamorous (Borrelli 2011; Duerst-Lahti 2014; Mandziuk 2017; Vigil 2014). In this section, we examine pollster inquiries about Michelle Obama as well as other first ladies concerning their status as mothers, role models, and fashion icons to provide further insights into the ways that Michelle Obama's adherence to new traditionalism drove her popularity.

While motherhood has long been a theme in American political discourse (Greenlee 2014), attention to motherhood within the political realm has increased over the last few decades (Elder and Greene 2012, chaps. 3–4; Thomas and Bittner 2017), resulting in what some refer to as “politicized motherhood” (Deason, Greenlee, and Langner 2015). Indeed, the fact that pollsters ask Americans to evaluate modern first ladies in terms of their performance as mothers underscores the way motherhood has become politicized, as well as the traditionally gendered expectations that U.S. society has for first ladies. An important element of being a new traditional first lady in the twenty-first century entails convincingly displaying one's motherhood credentials.

In April 1993, *U.S. News & World Report* asked Americans what they thought about Hillary Clinton as a mother: 72% said she was a very good or good mother, 7% said she was not so good, and 21% said they were unsure. While these are favorable results, Hillary Clinton fared less well when compared with other mothers. Around Mother's Day in 1998, Fox News asked Americans whether, while they were growing up, their mother was more like Hillary Clinton or June Cleaver: 59% selected June Cleaver and 16% Hillary Clinton. During Laura Bush's tenure as first lady, pollsters never asked Americans to assess her performance as a mother, but in April 2005, Fox News asked, “Growing up, do you think your mother was more like Hillary Clinton or Laura Bush?” with 21% selecting Hillary Clinton and 47% selecting Laura Bush. It is also telling that during the 1992 presidential election, pollsters asked whether Hillary Clinton (but not Barbara Bush) paid enough attention to her family (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018, chap. 3).

The challenge of fulfilling the motherhood expectations of the first lady was more complicated for Michelle Obama given her status as an African

American woman operating in a society with long-ingrained negative stereotypes attached to black women and black mothers (Guerrero 2011; Harris-Perry 2011; Hayden 2017). Soon after becoming first lady, Michelle Obama began referring to herself as “mom-in-chief,” making it clear through interviews and high-profile appearances that despite her Ivy League education, law degree, and accomplished career that her priorities in the White House would be to take care of her daughters and her family (Hayden 2017; Vigil 2014). According to Harris-Perry, “As Mom-in-Chief Michelle Obama ... subverts a deep, powerful, old public discourse on black women as bad mothers” (2011, 283–84).

An overwhelming majority of Americans felt that Michelle Obama was indeed doing a good job raising her daughters. In a 2011 *Washington Post* poll, 84% responded that she was a good mom, and only 2% said she was not. Even large majorities of Republicans and conservatives agreed with the assessment that Michelle Obama was a good mom, which is particularly significant given the more traditional views about motherhood and the family held by Republicans (Elder and Greene 2016). Thus, polling data reveal that Michelle Obama not only succeeded but excelled at persuading Americans she was a good mother.

In addition to asking Americans to evaluate first ladies through the lens of motherhood, pollsters have also asked the public to assess first ladies as symbols of American womanhood. More specifically, pollsters have asked whether the public views particular first ladies as good role models *for women*. Across the 1990s, pollsters asked Americans more than a dozen times whether Hillary Clinton was a good role model for women: 13 times while she was first lady, twice during the 1992 campaign, and once during the 1996 campaign. Interestingly, pollsters never asked whether Barbara Bush or Laura Bush was a good role model for women. Pollsters returned to this line of questioning once when Michelle Obama was poised to become first lady in December 2008 and once again in 2011. On the “womanhood” expectation, similar to the “motherhood” expectation, Michelle Obama fared very well in the eyes of Americans. In December 2008, 69% of Americans felt that Michelle Obama was a good role model for women, and by 2011, this figure had increased to 73%.⁵

Michelle Obama’s style and fashion choices were a mainstay in media coverage during her tenure as first lady. To the extent that Americans

5. Kaiser Family Foundation/*Washington Post* Black Women in America Survey, October 2011 (survey question), USSRS.2011WPH029.Q11A, Social Science Research Solutions [producer], obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL.

expect their first lady to be a fashion icon, Michelle Obama seems to have checked that box (Betts 2011; Ford 2017). Michelle Obama's clothing choices, however, were more than a fashion statement; they were political statements that held both political and symbolic importance (Ford 2015, 2017). Scholarly as well as media accounts argue that that Michelle Obama's accessible fashion choices, such as shopping online at J. Crew and wearing the same outfit more than once, helped her defuse negative stereotypes about black women and made her relatable to a wide swath of Americans (Ford 2017; Friedman 2017). Along similar lines, her decision to make sleeveless dresses a signature part of her style and to be photographed in workout clothes (in service of her Let's Move campaign) drew some controversy for challenging traditional dress standards for first ladies while also helping her embody the look of a contemporary middle-class mom (Ford 2017; Givhan 2017).

Although polling data about Michelle Obama's fashion choices is limited to two questions, the data suggest that her decisions about what to wear were well received and broadened Americans' views on what a first lady can wear and look like. In January 2009, the Associated Press asked Americans whether Michelle Obama made a good fashion statement in her inaugural outfit choice. While the major of Americans, 55%, responded that they did not care, of those who offered an opinion, it was overwhelmingly positive, with 40% saying yes and only a mere 3% saying no. In December 2009, a Marist poll asked whether Michelle Obama had changed fashion for the better or the worse. Although 39% of Americans felt she had not changed fashion, a plurality of Americans, 41%, felt she had changed fashion for the better, while only 8% thought she had changed it for the worse. Thus, while not all Americans showed interest in Michelle Obama's fashion choices, public opinion polls reveal that attitudes were decidedly net positive. The value of Michelle Obama's choices with regard to fashion are further illuminated when contrasted with those of Melania Trump, who has received widespread criticism for clothing choices that seem out of touch and decidedly non-empathetic, such as wearing stilettos on her travels to states devastated by recent hurricanes or donning a jacket saying "I really don't care, do U?" on a trip to visit children being detained at the U.S.-Mexico border (Givhan 2017; Heil 2018).⁶

6. Despite the attention given to Melania Trump's fashion in the news media, as of May 2018, the Roper Center polling archive had no record of any pollster inquiries being made about Melania Trump in regard to fashion. Nor were there any questions about her in relation to motherhood or her status as a role model.

To summarize, by emphasizing her role as a mother, giving up her career, and embracing traditional aspects of the role, Michelle Obama fulfilled several of Americans' gendered expectations of the first lady. Americans of all partisan and ideological stripes largely agreed on one thing — that Michelle Obama was a good mother; most Americans also viewed her as a good role model for women. In keeping with new traditionalism, she was also highly visible as first lady, with most Americans well aware of her initiatives on behalf of children and families and approving of her fashion choices. She strategically crafted her image to avoid falling victim to the negative images of black motherhood that are routinely applied to African American women in American society (Harris-Perry 2011). Her ability to retain a highly visible presence in the media while conforming to these traditional expectations contributed to her widespread popularity.

NEW TRADITIONALISM, INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE, AND MICHELLE OBAMA

Another indicator of Michelle Obama's model performance as a new traditional first lady can be seen in the incumbency advantage she accumulated from 2008 to 2012. We argue that the concept of incumbency advantage, typically applied to elected officials (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2004; Jacobson and Carson 2015; Mayhew 2008), also applies to public opinion toward presidential spouses and thus can help explain Michelle Obama's popularity. Incumbent first ladies have the opportunity to use the stature, resources, and responsibilities of the Office of the First Lady to increase their visibility and strengthen their approval ratings among the public, much like incumbent members of Congress (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018). The media coverage and institutional perquisites of office that come with holding the position of first lady give incumbent spouses an advantage in shaping their image and countering narratives about themselves.

Profiting from this incumbency advantage was more challenging for Michelle Obama than previous first ladies, as she was not able to benefit from the "velvet glove" of white womanhood that has historically been associated with traditional womanly virtues (Junn 2017) and had to neutralize the racial tropes surrounding African American woman that are prevalent in American society (Harris-Perry 2011). Previous studies analyzing the impact of media exposure on Michelle Obama's personal

favorability ratings demonstrated that this relationship was highly dependent on the type of media outlet or forum in which she appeared (Block and Haynes 2014), a finding that indicates achieving such high rates of public support required a sophisticated effort to manage her image as first lady.

To identify the extent to which Michelle Obama was able to benefit from incumbency advantage relative to other incumbent first ladies in the modern era, we calculate adjusted favorability scores based on the percentage of Americans who viewed the first ladies favorably divided by the percentage viewing them unfavorably (excluding those who could not assess them) for four incumbent spouses — Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama — and looked at change over time between the first time they were campaigning on behalf of their husbands and their second time in this role, when they were campaigning as incumbent first ladies.⁷

Figure 1 shows that the benefits of incumbency are conditional on whether first ladies adhere to the largely traditional public expectations discussed previously. Hillary Clinton's unfavorable ratings increased more than her favorable ratings from 1992 to 1996, which resulted in a decrease in her adjusted favorable ratings. The main difference between Hillary Clinton and the other three incumbent first ladies is that Hillary Clinton embraced a policy-making role — taking on a leadership role in constructing health care policy — while the other three did not. Barbara Bush, already very popular when she campaigned for her husband in 1988, grew even more popular over the next four years, increasing her adjusted favorability average by 7 points. Laura Bush did not experience an increase in her adjusted favorability score from 2000 to 2004, but this is primarily because her adjusted favorability was already high based on her name recognition as the daughter-in-law of a popular first lady in her own right (Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011).

Michelle Obama also capitalized on the platform of being first lady and was warmly received by the public. She focused on broadly popular issues, consistent with the gendered norms of the position, and, unlike Hillary

7. These results are based on the difference between the average favorable rating for presidential candidate spouses in the year prior to becoming first lady and the average favorability in the year of the next election (Barbara Bush, 1988 and 1992; Hillary Clinton, 1992 and 1996; Laura Bush, 2000 and 2004; Michelle Obama 2008 and 2012). Because of the limited sample size of poll questions asked about modern first ladies, a more systematic analysis of this relationship is not possible. Nevertheless, the results serve as a comparative case study of how public opinion toward first ladies changed over the course of their first terms.

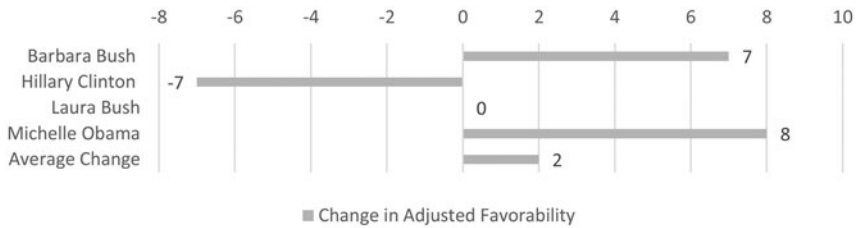


FIGURE 1. Change in Adjusted Favorability Ratings for Incumbent First Ladies Compared to First Campaign

Clinton, she did not play a high-profile policy role in her husband's administration. She was rewarded with an 8 percentage point increase in her adjusted favorability score, which stands alongside that of Barbara Bush's gains as the largest among modern presidential wives. Michelle Obama was able to amass greater support during her time in office while minimizing new opposition toward her in the process. Although not shown in Figure 1, from 2008 to 2012, as a greater portion of Americans got to know her, the percentage of Americans with an unfavorable view of Michelle Obama did not increase at all; only the percentage of those viewing her favorably increased (Elder and Frederick 2019). Essentially, as she became better known as first lady, a broad coalition of Americans developed a positive impression of her.

Michelle Obama's enormous popularity and significant incumbency boost as first lady serves as a contrast to her successor in the position. During the course of the 2016 campaign, Melania Trump registered the lowest favorability ratings of any modern presidential candidate spouse (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018, chap. 5). While Melania Trump has seen her favorability ratings climb since the 2016 election, she is still far below the levels of popularity Michelle Obama enjoyed as first lady. While Donald Trump's poor standing in public approval polling has depressed her ratings, the main drag on Melania Trump's popularity has been her failure to conform to the "new" aspect of new traditionalism — to play a visible role supporting her husband and actively championing feel-good causes (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018). Whereas Michelle Obama was an active and effective surrogate for the Obama administration (Wright 2016) by using the platform of first lady to enhance her image in the eyes of the public, Melania Trump has been far less willing to exploit the incumbency advantage, placing a lower ceiling on her ability to build broad support among the American people.

NEW TRADITIONALISM AND THE ABILITY TO RISE ABOVE PARTISAN POLARIZATION

By performing within the new traditional expectations of first ladies, Michelle Obama was also able to rise above, to some degree, the dampening role that party polarization has on the approval ratings of most national political figures. Partisanship remains a powerful driver of perceptions in American politics today (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Scholars have documented that party polarization is on the rise (Abramowitz 2018; Campbell 2016; Jacobson 2015, 2017, 2019) and that much of this divide is driven by negative partisanship, whereby negative feelings of the opposition party are more powerful than positive feelings toward their own party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Mason 2018). Evaluations of each president have been more polarized than the last (Jacobson 2003, 2019), and partisan polarization typically increases over the course of each presidency (Jacobson 2010). Indeed, this outcome is what occurred over the course of Barack Obama's presidency (Jacobson 2015).

Here we draw on 2012 ANES data to compare views of Michelle Obama and her husband among Republicans and Democrats (Figure 2).⁸ Instead of presenting respondents with a binary choice of whether they have a favorable or unfavorable view of Michelle Obama and Barack Obama, the ANES asks respondents to evaluate high-profile political individuals on a continuous scale from 0, the most negative value, to 100 the most positive, with 50 indicating a neutral response. The results show that, in line with existing public opinion research on first ladies (Knuckey and Kim 2016; Sulfaro 2007), evaluations of Michelle Obama are made through a partisan lens, with Democrats offering much warmer views of her than Republicans. Yet Figure 2 also highlights how partisanship exerts a weaker force on affect toward Michelle Obama than toward President Obama. In 2012, Democrats evaluated both Michelle Obama and Barack Obama very warmly and similarly. Republicans, however, viewed Barack Obama and Michelle Obama differently, giving President Obama an average rating of 26 and Michelle Obama an average of 37, a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$). Thus, views of Michelle Obama, while clearly affected by party polarization are less polarized than views of her husband.

8. We use 2012 ANES data because it is the best available source during Michelle Obama's tenure as first lady, given that ANES was not conducted during 2010 or 2014, and no question about Michelle Obama was asked on the 2016 ANES.

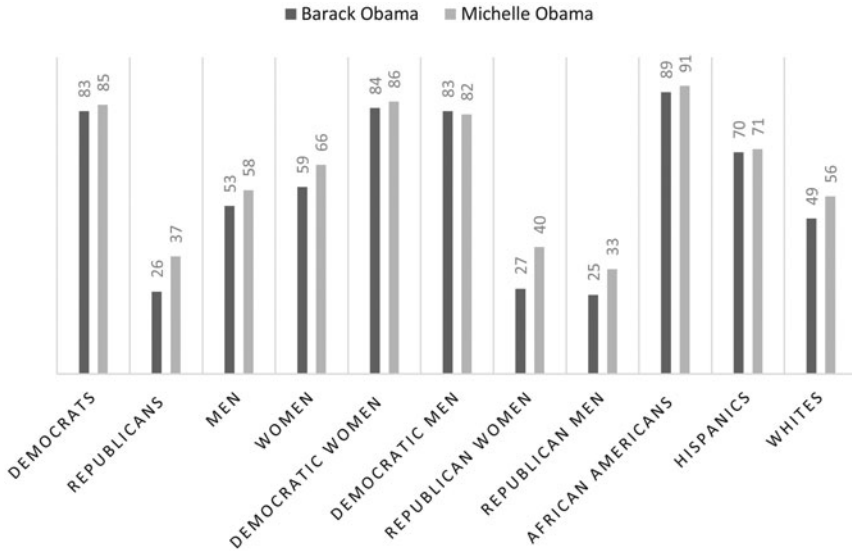


FIGURE 2. Mean Feeling Thermometer Ratings for Michelle Obama and Barack Obama from 2012 Anes

Other research shows that partisanship has less of an impact on perceptions of first ladies who behave in a manner consistent with traditional expectations (Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011; Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018). We argue that by performing within the traditional expectations of the role, Michelle Obama was able to remain less partisan than other administration figures. Although not a majority, a surprising number of Republicans viewed her warmly. Had Michelle Obama pursued the path that Hillary Clinton embraced as first lady in championing health care reform, she likely would have evoked a much more polarized reaction, especially since polarization was even higher during her husband's administration than in the 1990s (Jacobson 2015).

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION AND EVALUATIONS OF MICHELLE OBAMA

Beyond new traditionalism, another reason Michelle Obama was able to retain strong popularity was that she benefited from enhanced levels of support from groups she represented descriptively. Michelle Obama was one of the most high-profile women connected to the Obama

administration; she was also the first African American first lady. Drawing on public opinion data as well as an explicitly intersectional lens (Brown 2014; Smooth 2011, 2013), this article demonstrates that African Americans as well as women of all races and ethnicities felt a distinctively strong connection to Michelle Obama.

The power of descriptive representation is most evident in the results of a 2011 *Washington Post* and Kaiser Family Foundation survey, which looked deeply at public feelings about Michelle Obama and oversampled women of color. The results show that women, African Americans, and especially African American women felt a special connection to Michelle Obama. For example, 66% of women said they identified with Michelle Obama compared with 49% of men. The gender gap held true for both black Americans (79% of women versus 71% of men) and white Americans (44% of women versus 27% of men). Along similar lines, women were more likely than men (74% versus 64%) to agree that Michelle Obama “understands the problems of people like you.” While black Americans were much more likely than white Americans to feel this way, there was a sizable gender gap within both racial groups. Similar patterns hold for the issue of whether Michelle Obama “shares your values”; blacks felt this way much more than whites, and within these racial groups, women were more likely than men to express these views (Thompson and Williams 2012). Hispanics did not express as strong a connection to Michelle Obama as African Americans, but they did so at a higher level than whites, showing that Michelle Obama’s presence had symbolic value not just for black Americans but for Americans of color more broadly.

Finally, this *Washington Post* poll was one of the only surveys to ask specifically about Michelle Obama’s race. In particular, the poll asked whether Michelle Obama’s status as the nation’s first African American first lady had changed respondents’ overall impressions of black women in America. While most Americans said no, 39% of African Americans and 40% of Hispanics said yes compared with only 16% of whites, thus once again showing the special importance and resonance Michelle Obama held for communities of color. This result also illustrates Harris-Perry’s (2011) contention that while Michelle Obama may have succeeded in countering the many negative stereotypes of black women in evaluations of herself, perceptions of African American women more broadly in the eyes of white Americans did not change dramatically as a result of her presence on the national stage.

In summary, the results from the 2011 *Washington Post* and Kaiser Family Foundation poll illustrate that women and people of color were

distinctive in the extent to which they felt Michelle Obama represented their interests, problems, and concerns. Michelle Obama was a highly visible political figure that members of historically underrepresented groups could identify with as overcoming a major historical barrier that signified greater opportunities for all Americans to advance to the highest rungs of the ladder in U.S. society. The results of this poll further underscore that the full breadth and depth of reactions to Michelle Obama cannot be fully captured in traditional favorability survey items. Her public impact resonated on a deeper level among certain groups in society than standard favorability inquiries can capture.

We return now to the ANES 2012 data and, more specifically, the feeling thermometer ratings of Barack Obama and Michelle Obama in regard to gender (Figure 2). Democratic political figures typically benefit from the “gender gap,” receiving higher favorable scores and support among women relative to men (Fox 2013). This long-established pattern held true for both Michelle Obama and her husband; however, Michelle Obama benefited from even stronger support from women. Given the correlation between gender and partisanship, Figure 2 also breaks down feelings toward Michelle Obama and Barack Obama by both party and gender. These figures show that a driving force behind Michelle Obama’s strong support among women was Republican women in particular. In multivariate analyses controlling for confounding variables (not shown here, but see Elder and Frederick 2019) being a woman remains a significant predictor of warmer feelings toward Michelle Obama. Thus, we conclude that one of the drivers of Michelle Obama’s popularity was particularly strong support from women. Michelle Obama was one of the most visible women in the male dominated world of presidential politics and like many first ladies before her, Michelle Obama gave voice to the concerns and perspectives of women, offering them a type of representation and sense of connection to the political process that male presidential candidates have not (Borrelli 2011; Mansbridge 1999), and in return women viewed her more favorably.

Turning from gender to race, we are reminded that racial issues have become a prominent partisan cleavage over the past generation (Carmines and Stimson 1989), and race remains one of the most powerful predictors of political behavior and political attitudes in the current political era (Ansolabehere, Persily, and Stewart 2012; Czaja, Junn, and Mendelberg 2015). Over the past two generations, African American voters have supported Democratic candidates in overwhelming

numbers. Barack Obama's candidacies in 2008 and 2012 further strengthened that pattern (Sides and Vavreck 2013), signaling the importance of descriptive representation communities of color.

In line with this historical context, 2012 ANES data show that Michelle Obama was extraordinarily popular in 2012 with African Americans (as was her husband, the first African American president) registering a mean feeling thermometer rating of 92 degrees. As Elder and Frederick's (2019) analysis shows, this relationship holds up even after extensive controls for partisanship, ideology, and other political and demographic variables. This near universal support among the African American community illustrates that even though they are not elected office holders the visibility of first ladies can make them powerful symbolic figures for historically marginalized groups. Also important to note is that even as she amassed nearly unassailable popularity among African Americans, Michelle Obama managed to maintain a positive image among white Americans, with a mean feeling thermometer rating of 59 degrees — quite a bit higher than her husband's rating with whites (Figure 2). This cross-racial appeal is remarkable considering how so many issues divide white and black Americans in contemporary society (Czaja, Junn, and Mendelberg 2015).

As the first African American woman to serve as first lady, Michelle Obama generated enormous pride and admiration among black Americans. However, she was especially popular among African American women, as the 2012 ANES data indicate. African American men gave her an average rating of 87 degrees compared with an average rating of 94 degrees among African American women. Among this historically marginalized group based on both race and sex Michelle Obama achieved a level that few national political figures could reach among any demographic group. Michelle Obama benefited from an unshakable base of support among African Americans that would buoy her public standing through her tenure as first lady, but her intersectional connection with African American women was even more profound than it was with men.

Another aspect of race and public opinion toward Michelle Obama involves perceptions of African Americans and racial progress in general. Attitudes toward racial equality were a predominant factor in shaping political attitudes during President Obama's tenure on the national political scene (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler 2016; Tesler and Sears 2010) and in the 2016 election of his successor (Abramowitz 2018; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018; Tien 2017; Tolbert, Redlawsk,

and Gracey 2018). Previous analyses have also revealed that individuals with more negative attitudes toward African Americans feel less favorably toward Michelle Obama even after controlling for a collection of relevant political and demographic variables (Elder and Frederick 2019; Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018; Knuckey and Kim 2016). This relationship was a double-edged sword in that negative racial predispositions tended to reduce support for her, but more positive views toward African Americans boosted her profile. A comprehensive yet nuanced assessment of the racial dynamics of attitudes toward Michelle Obama requires an appreciation of her ability overcome the backlash among individuals concerned about her status as the first African American first lady. The fact that she managed to capture universal acclaim among African Americans as she enjoyed strong ratings among white Americans during a time when racial polarization increased (Tesler 2016) was a notable accomplishment.

However, this level of popularity did not come without some costs in the eyes of some observers. Some critics of the Obama administration felt like the president and his supporters did not speak out forcefully enough on issues of racial discrimination in many aspects of American society (West 2016).⁹ Michelle Obama avoided high-profile speeches on issues such as systemic racial injustices in the criminal justice system including police brutality and the deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police. Had she taken a leadership role in addressing these issues her favorability rating among whites and Republicans most likely would have suffered. In line with the new traditionalist expectations, by confining her activism to less controversial causes such as healthy children, Michelle Obama remained a historically beloved figure among African Americans while still enjoying support among many whites, particularly White women (Elder and Frederick 2019), an approach that ultimately optimized her political standing.

THE LEGACY OF FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA ON PUBLIC OPINION OF FIRST LADIES

A vast array of public opinion data confirm that Michelle Obama is one of the most well-liked presidential candidate spouses over the past generation

9. Systematic analyses conducted of public opinion and presidential attention to issues shows that President Obama's issue priorities, as measured by public speeches, were largely consistent with the priorities of African Americans in the mass public (Nteta, Rhodes, and Tarsi 2016).

(Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018). She was able to approach the lofty approval ratings of former first ladies such as Barbara Bush and Laura Bush despite confronting obstacles on the political landscape including increased partisan polarization. Moreover, despite being the first African American first lady at a time of heightened racial tensions and disagreements about the treatment of African Americans (Abramowitz 2018; Tesler 2016), a broad coalition of Americans warmly embraced her.

We argue that a driving factor behind Michelle Obama's popularity was her decision to embody the new traditionalism approach to the position of first lady. It is our contention that the comparatively small number of questions asked about Michelle Obama by pollsters during her eight years as first lady, as well as the relatively benign nature of those questions, reflects Michelle Obama's decision to operate within traditional expectations of the role of first lady, emphasizing her status as a mother and supporter of kids and families while eschewing any role as a policy adviser. Pollster inquiries, as well as the lack of inquiries, also reflect her near-flawless performance as first lady as she steered clear of gaffes and missteps. In a highly partisan environment under intense media scrutiny, she generated no notable scandals or controversies while remaining a highly visible surrogate of behalf of the Obama administration and throughout both of his presidential campaigns. She adroitly combined advocacy of broadly popular issues such as supporting military families and combating child obesity with a focus on serving as an effective surrogate for her husband. In return, most Americans viewed her as a good mother and a good role model for women and, ultimately, gave her high marks for her performance as first lady.

Michelle Obama's tenure on the national stage has several implications for her legacy and for future first ladies. While Michelle Obama may have broadened the position of first lady in some ways, most obviously in terms of what a first lady can look like, she did not radically transform the role. Despite her substantial educational and professional credentials, she acted within rather than to challenge traditional expectations of the first lady. This approach benefited Michelle Obama politically, but it came the expense of upending the highly gendered parameters that define the position of first lady, an outcome that many progressive feminists who wanted her to speak out more forcefully on major policy issues found disappointing (Harris-Perry 2011). As Vigil (2014) has noted, the traditional self-presentation and issue selection of presidential spouses may help their popularity, but at the cost of reinforcing the idea that political issues divide into a traditional masculine-feminine dichotomy.

By choosing to spend her eight years as first lady, emphasizing issues relating to motherhood, children, and families, Michelle Obama missed the opportunity to show that women can hold a variety of diverse policy interests and goals.

Another legacy Michelle Obama left behind was a big set of shoes for her successors to fill. By skillfully combining motherhood, highly visible advocacy for popular causes, and a charismatic public speaking role on behalf of those causes and her husband's administration, Michelle Obama reinforced the very high, new traditional expectations Americans have for future first ladies. This, in turn, helps explain why First Lady Melania Trump, who has chosen to play a less active and visible role, has struggled to gain the approval of a wide a swath of Americans.

This data reviewed here also show that the office of first lady is one of the last to become completely sucked into the vortex of partisan polarization. There is no doubt that increased partisan polarization set limits on how high her favorable ratings could go; Michelle Obama did not manage to get the level of support among Republicans that Barbara Bush managed to achieve among Democrats (Elder, Frederick, and Burrell 2018, chap. 3). It is unlikely any presidential spouse going forward will be able to capture this level of support among adherents of the opposition party. However, by embracing new traditionalism — emphasizing traditionally feminine roles and issues, while also being a highly visible presence on behalf of her husband and feel-good causes — Michelle Obama was able to generate more favorable responses among groups not typically disposed to like Democratic national political figures, including Republicans and white Americans. It allowed her to avoid the partisan polarization experienced by First Lady Hillary Clinton (Troy 2006) and amass support from a broad range of Americans during her time in the White House.

While racial resentment also played a role in limiting how high her approval ratings could go (Knuckey and Kim 2016), her status as the first African American first lady was also a contributor to her strong approval ratings. Survey data show that as first lady, Michelle Obama provided a particularly meaningful form of representation to groups she descriptively represented and who have historically had little representation within the realm of presidential politics and presidential administrations — women, African Americans, and, importantly, at the intersection of these two groups, African American women. These groups felt a particularly strong connection to Michelle Obama, and in turn, they viewed her particularly favorably, helping to account for her popularity. The broad

acceptance by the American people of a woman of color in the role of first lady is important; it is something that was most likely unthinkable just a few decades previous. While future public opinion polls will be needed to offer a more robust test of the impact on public opinion, it seems likely to have altered and broadened what a first lady can look like in the eyes of Americans, especially American children, the focus of so much of First Lady Michelle Obama's advocacy and outreach.

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