The First Lady of the United States: A Traditional Role in the Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

Although first ladies themselves have long been a topic of interest for historians, analysis of the role of the first lady is a fairly new topic for scholars. This study focuses specifically on first ladies as issue advocates, and looks at how and why first ladies’ issue advocacy has developed since female suffrage. I posit that first ladies’ issue advocacy developed linearly from traditional to modern over time. I created a model to define traditional and modern advocacy based on the topic of issue and the method through which the first ladies championed their cause. Based on historical analysis of biographies, autobiographies, newspaper articles and other relevant analyses of first ladies, each woman was given a classification in the model. Results show that first ladies’ issue advocacy did not in fact progress linearly from traditional to modern over time. Rather, it followed a periodic pattern that suggests that times of women’s advancement allowed for modern advocacy.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ........................................................................................................p. 4

  a. Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................p. 6

  b. Hypothesis ..........................................................................................................p. 11

**Methodology** ........................................................................................................p. 11

**Data** .....................................................................................................................p. 13

**Results** ................................................................................................................p. 14

  1. Good Mother Civil Society Champions ..............................................................p. 14

     i. Emphasis on Good Mother .............................................................................p. 15

     ii. Emphasis on Civil Society Champion ............................................................p. 22

  2. Good Mother Policy Champions ........................................................................p. 33

     i. “Spokesmothers” ............................................................................................p. 33

     ii. Single Issue Policy Champions ....................................................................p. 37

  3. Good Citizen Policy Champions .........................................................................p. 42

     i. The “Yardstick” .............................................................................................p. 42

     ii. First Ladies During the Feminist Movement ...............................................p. 47

     iii. The Presidential Candidate ........................................................................p. 52

  4. Good Citizen Civil Society Champions ..............................................................p. 56

**Discussion** .........................................................................................................p. 56

**Conclusion** .........................................................................................................p. 62

**References** .........................................................................................................p. 65
INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the first lady is more than just the woman married to the President. The women who occupy this role are often presented to the country and the world as the model American woman. They live in the public eye, and as such, are subject to public scrutiny. Some of these women merely abided the spotlight, and some avoided the attention as often as possible. The women that chose to embrace the spotlight quickly became celebrities. Jacqueline Kennedy is known for her popularity and her ability to set trends, but lesser known Frances Folsom Cleveland equally captured the admiration of the nation when she married President Cleveland at the White House back in 1886.

Although a president’s wife can gain celebrity status, the role also has an inherent political side. For a large part of American history, first ladyship was the highest political role a woman could hope to achieve. Women were active in social movements and small-scale communal governance but, except for a few notable exceptions, were kept from the political sphere. In 1920, female suffrage allowed for a major expansion of female political activism beyond the traditional community and volunteering roles. As women’s involvement in politics progressed, they steadily gained more access to power and more representation in governing bodies. In recent years, women have served in some of the highest positions, including Speaker of the House, Secretary of State, and Supreme Court Justice. With women achieving these heights on their own merits, the first ladyship, a position attained through being married to a powerful man, is left in an interesting place.

There are no formal, legal responsibilities of a first lady. Rather, historical trends have dictated what is expected of those who assume the role. Throughout the years, first ladies have had the core responsibility of being the nation’s hostess. They are in charge of running the White
House in terms of social functions, décor, staff management, and more. As mentioned, first ladies are also inherently part of the political process, boosting a president’s political capital throughout the campaign, as well as while he is in office. Some wives have expanded the role by becoming presidential advisors through their relationship with the president. However, history shows that if the influence of the first lady over the president seems too strong, there is extreme public backlash. There is a well-documented positive correlation between how politically active a first lady is and how negatively she is covered by the press (Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Edwards and Chen 2000). Therefore, this power through proximity can only be exerted behind the scenes in order to be effective.

The public face of the first ladyship’s influence is her chosen issue advocacy. In comparison to the presidential power to persuade, called the bully pulpit, the first lady has what Nancy Reagan deemed the “white glove pulpit.” It is through their issue advocacy that first ladies can gain a public image separate from that of their husband. Though this issue advocacy does not have the same face over time, it is a constant of the role. Recent scholarship has associated 20th century first ladies with a specific issue or cause, which they used their position to promote. Though this issue advocacy is more formal now, it has existed since Martha Washington made a priority of helping veterans of the Revolution. First ladies throughout the 1800s served as heads of national organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, volunteered in veterans hospitals, and spoke on social issues like temperance. Issue advocacy, while seemingly a recent development of the role, has actually been fundamental throughout time.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of this concept is found in a letter sent from a former first lady to a young woman about to assume the position. Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter
wrote a letter to Michelle Obama when she first assumed the role in 2009. In this brief note, Carter specifically suggested that Obama, “select a few key projects,” to which she should dedicate her time and influence. Carter stated, “from now on, for the rest of your life, you will have the ability, perhaps even the obligation, to be a force for good in the world.” This statement, from one first lady to another, shows the importance of the white glove pulpit and of issue advocacy in the first ladyship, and goes as far as to deem it an obligation of the position.

The first ladies that served after female suffrage are more recognizable in the role of the issue advocate because it was more accepted for women to have a place in the political sphere. This study looks to see how the first ladies that have served since suffrage approached their advocacy, and how and why it has developed over this near century.

*Theoretical Framework*

In the 1980’s, historical scholarship began to recognize the importance of first ladies in U.S. culture, prompting a surge in biographies on various first ladies. These biographies discussed hidden political roles, which brought first ladies into the political realm for the first time. It was not until the tenure of Hillary Clinton, an active and widely controversial first lady, that political scientists took notice of first ladies. Scholarship shifted from biographical work on individuals, by historians, to analysis of the first ladyship as a political role, written by political scientists (O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft 1996; Eksterowicz and Paynter 2000). All of the studies that seriously consider the role of first lady were produced after at least three years of Hillary Clinton’s tenure in office, showing a significant trend in the last 20 years.

A theme throughout the scholarship on first ladies is that the role of first lady has developed into a formal executive office position. Scholars compare the position of first lady to
the vice-presidency. Both positions went through stages of being ceremonial, political, and policy-making. Their analysis holds that the first ladyship is a formal government position that has slowly integrated itself into the workings of the White House (O’Connor, Nye, and van Assendelft 1996). Further literature builds on this idea by arguing that the first ladyship has reached nearly full integration with White House operations. A close look at the actions of each first lady from Eleanor Roosevelt to Hillary Clinton showed how the undertakings of certain first ladies have contributed to the formalization of the role. The study suggests that each first lady’s relationship with the president was the driving force behind how she acted in her role. For example, the first ladies with marriages that seem to the public as also being professional partnerships were set apart as more powerful (Eksterowicz and Paynter 2000). Here, success for a first lady was defined as performing work that is closely tied to the work of the White House.

While establishing that the first ladyship is a formal role, scholars have grappled with the task of actually defining this position, relying heavily on legal precedent as a starting point. Three legal standards in particular are used to argue whether or not the role of the first lady functions as a formal presidential advisor (Borelli 2002). First is an anti-nepotism statute, which would preclude the first lady from a formal role in her husband’s administration, therefore defining the first lady as just a spouse. However, the second law examined here, passed in 1978, allowed Congress to directly budget to the spouse of the President for her duties in assisting the presidency. This formally acknowledged for the first time a role for the first lady beyond wife of the President (Watson 2000). The position of first lady was further codified as governmental by the third legal precedent regarding first ladies. In 1993, suit was brought against Hillary Clinton questioning a possible legal requirement to make public her health care task force meetings. If she was a government actor working on behalf of the administration, she would not have to
comply with this request. The decision of the court stated a recognition that first lady was in fact a governmental position (Borelli 2002).

In their quest to define the role, other scholars examine the actual individual political activities of first ladies in order to identify informal yet well established patterns (Watson 2000). Watson creates a model he calls “the four p’s” – pet project, public policy participant, political player, and pomp and pageantry. These four p’s encapsulate how the first lady has grown to be a political position, shown through the analysis of first ladies in public policy and politics. But, it does not ignore the traditional domestic aspects of being the country’s hostess, shown through the analysis of pomp and pageantry. The first “p”, pet project, is of particular importance. Watson makes it clear that the phrase pet project is not to imply a small or inconsequential endeavor, but rather denotes the attachment each first lady has to her chosen cause (93). Watson makes a large advancement in the study of the first ladyship by acknowledging that each first lady is associated with a specific issue as if it is a requirement of the job. Scholarship has yet to fully examine how pet projects are chosen, whether there are limits as to what can be chosen, and if so, how those limits are established, and why these pet projects are important in understanding the development of the role of first lady.

Though the rise in scholarship was sparked by an unconventional first lady, research continues to investigate the traditional role of the first lady—what Watson calls pomp and pageantry. One specific study of note puts forward that first ladies actually gained their political importance from their social role. For example, Jacqueline Kennedy lobbied under the guise of entertaining by strategically seating important guests at functions next to advocates for her husbands’ policies (Mayo 2000). Her success at such is noted by scholarship when traditionally evaluating the first lady based on her ability to further her husband’s agenda.
Though it is firmly established that first ladies can boost the political capital of the president, scholarship has posited that the president’s popularity also impacts the first lady in what is called the reflected-glory theory. This theory is defined as spouses of the president attaining celebrity status through their proximity to power, rather than their own personal achievements. Although there was some evidence of this theory, more importantly for the furthering of first lady scholarship, the study found that first ladies could claim reputations for themselves. Though not the original hypothesis, the study concludes that first ladies make a positive legacy by having their own achievements and public personality, and by becoming true political colleagues with the president (Simonton 1996). This study stands out among the scholarship because it differentiates the successes and failures of first ladies from their contributions to their husbands’ administrations, treating first ladies as their own public entities.

The last dimension of first lady scholarship examines the relationship between the first lady and the press. Case studies examining press coverage of first ladies, through newspaper articles, magazine photos, and editorial cartoons, concluded that the more a first lady is framed throughout a story as politically active, the more negative the coverage (Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Edwards and Chen 2000). Further analysis studied differences between the portrayal of a politically active and a traditional first lady. Editorial cartoons represented both Hillary Clinton and Barbara Bush as powerful in their relationships. However, Clinton—the politically active wife—was constantly depicted as trying to steal the presidency, while Bush—the traditional domestic wife—was shown as a vital source of strength for the Bush White House (Edwards and Chen 2000).

Edwards and Chen’s work is important in the development of first lady scholarship. It not only acknowledges that first ladies are different in how they balance the divide between public
and domestic, but it also attempts to analyze how those different approaches impact the effectiveness of the first lady. It also points out that first ladies are not treated the same way as other women in politics, highlighting how first ladies may not follow a linear path of women’s advancement.

Most of the recent scholarship on first ladies has examined at great length the different strategies first ladies have used to deal with the press and how the press has in turn framed their actions (Beasly 2005, Burns 2008). This views the first lady as a more active participant in her relationship with the press, consistent with the general trend of treating the first lady more as a political figure than a celebrity.

Though scholarship on first ladies has developed significantly over the last 20 years, there are still large gaps in the literature. This paper strives to expand more substantially into first ladies’ role as issue advocates. As described earlier, there is little analysis regarding how these projects are chosen, how they are carried out, and what they mean for the first ladyship as a political role. This paper scrutinizes the specifics of the issue advocacy of the 16 post-women’s suffrage first ladies, and classifies them in a model of traditional and modern issue advocacy. These classifications will determine whether first ladies have progressed from traditional to modern in a linear way. Existing scholarship does not attempt to explain why some first ladies pushed traditional boundaries, while others remained traditional in their issue advocacy. A recent scholarly work starts to look at the popularity gaps between Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton (Matz and Stelluto 2015), but stops short of making a claim as to what caused the disparity in their public appeal. This study defines how first ladies’ issue advocacy developed, displaying trends that allow for preliminary exploration of factors that impact first ladies’ advocacy strategies.
Hypothesis

I hypothesize that first ladies’ issue advocacy has progressed linearly with time from traditional to modern. This hypothesis relies on a model of traditional and modern issue advocacy that I created, defined further in the methodology section, based on the type of issue a first lady chooses and how she goes about her advocacy. If this hypothesis is true, then the first ladies in most recent history will be consistently more modern in their advocacy than those at the beginning of the time frame analyzed herein. Also, this hypothesis posits that there is a general trend toward modernity, and thus, an early modern first lady followed by a progression from traditional to modern would not disprove this hypothesis. Rather, this early first lady would be treated as an outlier.

METHODOLOGY

This project uses historical analysis to look at the first ladies who have served since women gained the right to vote. This spans from Florence Harding, who began her tenure as first lady in 1921, to the current first lady, Michelle Obama, a total of 16 women. These cases were selected because suffrage opened up possibilities for women to advocate within institutions through voting, running for office, and holding government positions. This shift in possibilities for women reflects on the first ladyship as well, making a natural starting point for analysis.

My design uses an overarching model of traditional to modern issue advocacy to categorize first ladies. I organized this model on two axes in order to classify first ladies in concrete and specific terms of modernity. The first deals with the subject a first lady selects to be her issue of focus. The issues are classified as either, “good mother,” or, “good citizen.” Good mother issues are defined as those that are safely “female” in nature, having to do with women’s
roles as caregivers and teachers of morality. Good citizen issues are those that could be considered under the purview of males or females equally. For the purpose of analysis, good mother politics is considered traditional, while good citizen politics is considered modern. The second feature of the traditional to modern model is whether the first lady champions her issue by supporting actions taken in civil society, or whether she becomes a champion for a specific policy or piece of legislation. Championing issues in civil society is the traditional approach, while policy action is considered modern. Because this model uses two axes, it is possible for first ladies to be traditional in one sense and modern in another. The classifications that have one traditional variable and one modern variable are viewed equally, independent of which variable is traditional and which is modern.

After thorough historical analysis of each of the 16 first ladies since female suffrage, the cases have been classified along the two axes presented and depicted in figure 1. Each first lady has been deemed one of the following: a good mother civil society champion, a good citizen civil society champion, a good mother policy champion, or a good citizen policy champion. Good mother civil society champions are the most traditional issue advocates and good citizen policy champions are the most modern issue advocates.

**Figure 1. Traditional to Modern Issue Advocacy Model**
DATA

Data for this analysis comes from a mixture of primary and secondary sources. This includes archival research from the time of each first lady, with a heavy reliance on newspaper stories. This also includes interviews, speeches, and press conference transcripts. These sources were accessed from archives online such as the historical New York Times database. Many first ladies have written autobiographies, which were examined but understood with the influence of hindsight and the possibility of ghostwriters. Secondary sources flesh out this research to provide a more clear understanding of the actions of each first lady. These sources include biographical information, histories, and other analyses of individual first ladies and their impact on the role. Secondary sources came from the Duke University Library, the George Washington University Library, and online journals. I coded the data by hand along five key themes. These include biographical information, issue advocacy, political action, volunteering or civil society interaction, and relationship with the president. Data was collected until saturation and a classification could confidently be made.

As mentioned above when discussing autobiographies, some of the data may suffer from hindsight bias. There are also political biases, which may pervade public speeches or interviews given not only while the first lady is in office, but also afterward depending on the first lady and if she remained in the public sphere after leaving office. A last point to consider is that there might be cultural dynamics at play that keep people from criticizing first ladies. If it is a primary source, there could be political factors biasing someone’s characterization of a first lady. If it is a source looking back on a first lady, the bias may be to show them more deference as a historical figure since there is nothing to gain from criticizing. This is especially true for sources produced as part of historical projects to preserve the role of the first lady, such as the information from the
Smithsonian Institute. On the other hand, sources regarding first ladies who served further ago may be subject to the biases that define their husbands’ historical legacies. For example, first ladies like Lou Hoover and Florence Harding may be regarded differently by history because of the way President Hoover mishandled Depression relief or because of Harding’s historical association with the Teapot Dome scandal. Bias is likely to be a bigger problem for the current first lady, Michelle Obama, and for Former First Lady Hillary Clinton, since they are both still active in politics. This being acknowledged, the classification system does not include public perception as a factor. Rather, it works around these potential biases by dealing solely in the facts of the topic of a first lady’s advocacy and her method of championing her chosen cause.

RESULTS

This section will dive deeper into what it means to be each type of issue advocate included in the classification model. By looking at the issue advocacy of the first ladies that fall within each classification, it becomes clear what is meant by labels like “good mother civil society champion” or “good citizen policy champion.” It also shows that there is complexity and diversity within these categories. First ladies are grouped by advocacy style within each classification to show a clear picture of first lady issue advocacy. The information in this section will provide the evidence needed to prove or disprove the hypothesis that first ladies’ issue advocacy developed from traditional to modern over time.

1. Good Mother Civil Society Champions

The first classification I will discuss is good mother civil society champion, defined as a first lady who advocates through private and volunteer organizations for issues in the
traditionally female realm. Half of the first ladies being discussed in this study fit into this category, making it the most common style of advocacy. Since this classification is the most traditional in the model, it might be confused as labeling the women as being the least active first ladies. It is true that the least active issue advocates in the sample fall into this category. However, the classification model purposefully does not account for frequency of advocacy events. The role of first lady developed over the nearly a century time span being analyzed. In order to avoid confounding factors such as societal changes, the classification is based solely on topic and method of advocacy. This means that good mother civil society champions can look very different in their advocacy. The following analysis breaks down this classification into two groups: those who emphasized the good mother part of their classification and those who emphasized the civil society aspect. This acknowledges that there is variety within this overarching classification of good mother civil society champion.

**Emphasis on Good Mother**

There are four women that were focused more on the family aspect of their role than their advocacy. Their tenures included issue advocacy in some way, but it was not a large portion of their activity as first lady. Grace Coolidge and Mamie Eisenhower were both very public figures who were immensely popular in their day. Coolidge served from 1923 to 1929 and Eisenhower from 1953-1961. These two women chose to focus the attention they received into their domestic actions as the hostess of the White House. On the other hand, Bess Truman and Pat Nixon were interested in staying as far from the spotlight as possible. Truman was first lady from 1945-1953 and Nixon served from 1969-1974. Their desire for privacy inherently did not mix with active issue advocacy, since attempting to bring attention to a cause also brings attention to the
advocate. These four women are good mother civil society champions because the minimal advocacy they performed fell within civil society. For the most part, they were focused on being the wife of the president, and it was this family focus that defined their time in office.

A recent biography of Grace Coolidge credits her with two main contributions to society through her time as first lady: being a fashion leader for the country and bringing charm and compassion to the White House (Ferrell 2008, ix). While valuable and admirable, this is not a first lady for whom issue advocacy was a main priority. In her last year in office, her private fundraiser for the Clarke School for the Deaf was the largest act of civil society championing that she performed in her tenure (118). She never advocated for any sort of policy or commented on issues of the time (73). She is clearly a good mother civil society champion, although even her civil society work was scarce. A New York Times article from after President Coolidge’s reelection describes his wife’s take on the first ladyship, stating, “The Red Cross is her only club, she makes no speeches, and, except in so far as her official duties require it, she does not participate in the affairs of Washington society,” (New York Times, 23 November 1923).

Historians looking back have assigned Coolidge the pet project of helping the deaf because they carry the notion that every first lady had a singular, identifiable cause. Coolidge’s predecessor Florence Harding was widely known for being tied to work with veterans. But Coolidge was never making headlines for her work with the deaf (Anthony 1991, 1: 422). Rather, it was more of an interest of hers than a project, stemming from her years as a teacher at the Clarke School for the Deaf before getting married. In 1935, well after she was first lady, she joined the board of the Clarke School and took a much more active role in the administration of the school (Mayo 1996, 191). But during her time in the White House, she was rarely involved more deeply than hosting luncheons for organizations or prominent deaf individuals. She saw
taking credit for her work with the school as self interested, so she never made press
announcements or public engagements for her cause (Anthony 1991, 1: 422).

Mamie Eisenhower fits a similar model. She too was immensely popular even before her husband became president, and she was a very visible presence in his campaign. As Dwight Eisenhower’s campaign slogan “I like Ike” was worn on buttons, so too appeared “I like Mamie” pins (Mayo 1996, 219). But even with this celebrity and attention, Mamie Eisenhower’s first priority was being Dwight Eisenhower’s wife. While the Chief Usher of the White House called her predecessor, Bess Truman, “the boss,” Mamie Eisenhower was “Mrs. Ike,” (West 1973, 141). In her eight years as first lady, Eisenhower entered the oval office only four times, indicating that she was not engaged with the policy workings of the administration (Harris 2005, 521-537). She was a representation of the proud 50s housewife, very against nontraditional women and divorce. She promoted life as a housewife, which in and of itself was part of her issue advocacy, choosing to use her celebrity to bring attention to White House social functions rather than causes. In a New York Times article published during Dwight Eisenhower’s first campaign for president, Mamie is quoted saying that her role as first lady would be “playing policeman -- seeing that he [Dwight Eisenhower] gets to bed on time and doesn't get irritated by small things.” She admitted to having a rule against making speeches because, “Ike speaks well enough for both of us,” (New York Times, 3 September 1952).

When Mamie Eisenhower did make public comments on issues, she took on the issues that were popular among women’s groups of the time. This includes the nuclear preparedness school program duck and cover, helping veterans and families of those in Korea, fighting cancer and polio, and supporting the UN in their mission of peace (Anthony 1991, 1: 564). There were often legislative proposals linked to these issues, and women’s groups were gaining membership
and clout in this time despite the notion that the 50s was a time in which women were removed from politics. In fact, membership in the League of Women Voters grew by 44% between 1950 and 1958 (Goss 2013, 33). However, Eisenhower stayed out of any policy agenda or direct association with these women’s organizations. She only embraced a specific project, work with the American Heart Association, after her husband had a heart attack in 1955. She became the honorary chairwoman of the “heart campaign”, and the years of her sponsorship were the most fruitful in the history of the campaign (Anthony 1991, 1: 586).

Mamie Eisenhower was totally consumed and fulfilled by her role as housewife, and the issues she commented on fit squarely into maternalism. It can be viewed that her focus on being a homemaker was in fact promoting an issue, the role that women have in domestic life. This staying in the domestic sphere naturally led her to stay away from her husband’s sphere, policy making, so her issue advocacy functioned in the realm of civil society. Her work with the American Heart Association is a perfect example because she approached it as an extension of caring for her husband. She did not push for more government funding for research on heart health, but rather, ran a campaign with a non-profit to raise money. This work is very similar to Coolidge and her connection to the Clarke School for the Deaf. Both causes were personal to the first ladies, and they worked for them and cared deeply, but they were not a key portion of the agenda. They also never strayed into policy proposals having to do with these causes. Rather, they were public wives, in the eye of the public mostly through their domestic duties. Coolidge and Eisenhower were clear examples of good mother civil society champions, a classification they earned by the type of advocacy they performed despite it not being their main focus.

Though Coolidge and Eisenhower were not focused on issue advocacy, they were comfortable in their role as public women. Being first lady brings with it a degree of publicity
that cannot be escaped, but Bess Truman and Pat Nixon tried to stay out of the spotlight as much as possible. These reluctantly public women were similar to Coolidge and Eisenhower in that they too were focused on their role as a member of the first family rather than as an issue advocate.

Bess Truman was suddenly thrust into the role of first lady with the death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. First lady was a role Truman specifically did not want (Anthony 1991, 1: 517). She made it clear that she would be a very different first lady than her predecessor, Eleanor Roosevelt, when she put out a statement saying that she would not be playing a public role (Mayo 1996, 215). Eleanor Roosevelt had been a largely public and active issue advocate, and was seen by the public as a key part of her husband’s administration. Truman was not uninvolved from the actions of the administration; she just was not a public figure. Her husband affectionately called her “the boss”, and met with her for two hours every night to work on policy or speeches. Chief Usher in the White House at the time, J.B. West, said that Bess had more of a say in the policies of the White House than Eleanor Roosevelt did in her tenure (West 1973, 77). But this influence never translated into public activity. In fact, she was so anonymous to the public that she was able to shop in Washington without being recognized (Anthony 1991, 1: 521).

Since Bess Truman had no formal advocacy program, the events that she attended ended up defining how the public viewed her priorities. These events were held by organizations that dealt with safely feminine issues, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Red Cross (Anthony 1991, 1: 531). Although Truman specifically said she would not choose a project, she did focus her minimal advocacy on austerity programs (536). She also pushed for the purchase of U.S. Bonds, which were used to lower the wartime debt the U.S. had accumulated
over World War II. Truman was quoted in the *New York Times* discussing these bonds, saying, “the future well-being of most American families rests largely upon the resoluteness of women in maintaining the wartime habit of investing every dollar above needed living expenses in United States savings bonds,” (*New York Times*, 7 June 1946). This statement on treasury bonds is not advocating for a policy for how the government should mitigate debt. Rather, she calls on private individuals to perform the action of buying the bonds when possible. This also falls into the realm of good mother, because the issue was framed as household budgeting and protecting families. She stated women need to buy bonds to, “take the lead in backing the future of their loved ones,” (*New York Times*, 7 June 1946), making this issue about women acting in their traditional role of caregiver.

Like Bess Truman, Pat Nixon tried to remain as private as possible. It is important to note that although Pat Nixon was much more active when directly compared to the other three women in this category, she was acting with the intention of drawing as little attention to her personal life as possible. After two first ladies with very defined projects, Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, Nixon returned to the mold of a passive first lady promoting civil society from afar. She did not have a formal project at first, and described her issue advocacy best with the statement, “people are my project,” (Harris 2005, 589- 607). However, a *New York Times* article written in 1970 about the first year of Nixon’s tenure brings up a major change between then and the post World War II era in which Truman served; the public had come to expect a project from their first lady (*New York Times*, 26 January 1970).

Following criticism, Pat Nixon announced that her project was the recruitment of volunteers. She did a tour of the country, stopping at centers run by volunteers. Her second volunteerism tour was to college campuses, with the goal of mobilizing young people into
volunteer actions and redeeming college students to the public. This was in the early 70s, during the heart of anti-war protesting, and Pat Nixon did end up meeting protesters and sharing the stage with people prominently sporting peace buttons (Anthony 1991, 2: 181). But for the most part, her efforts to recruit volunteers stayed more in the vein of finding people to serve as teachers’ aides, provide home care for mentally disabled and aged, work in juvenile detention centers, and so forth. (West 1973, 331). Throughout her tenure as first lady, her ideas of volunteerism formalized, and she became closely associated with the quasi-government sponsored National Center for Voluntary Action (Anthony 1991, 2: 177-178).

Pat Nixon thrived in her role as goodwill ambassador around the world, and she extended her volunteerism internationally by taking on the relief effort after a major earthquake in Peru. She not only organized efforts, but she also went to Lima despite political tension between Peru and US at the time (Anthony 1991, 2: 185-186). In a New York Times story covering her efforts, she is said to have, “hugged children, kissed old women, patted hands, and conveyed her sympathy with smiles and waves.” Despite these inherently emotional displays, the article also brings up one of the most haunting criticisms of Nixon, that she is, “plastic Pat.” (New York Times, 13 September 1970). The role of first lady had shifted such that an advocacy project was a requirement of the job, so Nixon needed to engage with the press on some level. “Plastic Pat” was the consequence of consistently having her guard up. Concerns that she was hiding her real emotions and personality stayed with her through the entire Watergate scandal and through the end of her time as first lady (Anthony 1991, 2: 219).

Pat Nixon’s focus on volunteerism fits the good mother civil society model to a tee. It had been women’s role for decades to organize communities into caregiving roles. The New York Times specifically wrote, “Mrs. Nixon's First Lady activities are, essentially, the kind that were
certified Appropriately Feminine by women’s magazines of the nineteen fifties,” (New York Times, 13 September 1970). Also, the idea of volunteerism in and of itself is reliance on civil society to fix problems. Nixon even stated that matching volunteers with social problems can accomplish things legislation alone cannot (Anthony 1991, 2: 177).

Based on the topic and style of advocacy, Pat Nixon, Bess Truman, Mamie Eisenhower, and Grace Coolidge were good mother civil society champions. All four of the women were limited in their issue advocacy within the context of when they served, and were primarily focused on being part of the first family. This is a marked difference from the four remaining first ladies in the category of good mother civil society champions, who were active proponents for their causes.

**Emphasis on Civil Society Champion**

The remaining four good mother civil society champions are Barbara Bush, Laura Bush, Nancy Reagan, and Michelle Obama. These four women make it clear that although good mother civil society champion is the most traditional classification in the advocacy model, the first ladies who fit within this category were not necessarily less active than those classified as modern advocates. Rather, it is their topic choice and style of advocacy that make them traditional.

Barbara and Laura Bush started their respective terms as first lady in a very similar fashion. Barbara served from 1989-1993 and Laura from 2001-2009, separated by only the Clinton administration. Their projects were nearly identical, with Barbara focused on literacy, and Laura on education and books. By looking at these two women next to each other, it is clear that Laura Bush used her mother-in-law as a model. However, the extenuating circumstances of 9/11 and wartime shaped Laura Bush into a more active first lady. Both of these women were
good mother civil society champions, but Barbara Bush fits a mold closer to an updated public wife, while Laura Bush started in this model but grew into a more activist role.

Barbara Bush was committed to literacy long before her time as first lady. When her husband originally ran for the Republican nomination for president in 1980, Barbara Bush had said that she would make her project literacy. Though her husband didn’t win that election, he became vice president, and Barbara Bush used her time as second lady to initiate her activism on literacy (Harris 2005, 655-671). While second lady, she wrote *C. Fred's Story*, a children’s book about the Bush family dog, and gave all proceeds to literacy foundations. She had been working with two literacy groups before, but this was her first major undertaking, and it raised about $100,000. She went on talk shows to promote the book and through that, discuss illiteracy rates on a large stage (B. Bush 1994, 188-189).

Just days after her husband was elected, before the inauguration, there was a literacy conference at the White House to honor Barbara Bush with the creation of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. Bush describes that the goal of the foundation was to make literacy a value in every single home in America and to break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. The foundation awarded 52 grants of $2 million all over the country. Also, extra inaugural money went in the form of $5,000 grants to two libraries in each state. Beyond fundraising for literacy, Barbara Bush also made speeches, hosted events, and visited literacy programs around the country. She specifically focused on underprivileged urban areas and made visits to schools there despite concerns raised by the secret service. Her autobiography includes part of her daily log of activities in one week as first lady. In this one average week, Bush was involved in five school, library, or literacy events. She also wrote another book for literacy while first lady and recorded tapes of her reading famous children’s books. She partnered with
celebrities on this project, who also recorded books to tape, which made the conversation on literacy more widespread (B. Bush 1994, 250-297). George H. W. Bush signed the National Literacy Act of 1991, the only piece of legislation to date enacted specifically for literacy. However, Barbara Bush specifically states that she was given more credit than she deserved for this act. She says that she was not involved in the policy specifically, just involved in bringing the issue into the light (B. Bush 1994, 425). Bush worked entirely within civil society, raising money and promoting existing volunteer organizations, on her safely feminine project.

Laura Bush started out her time as first lady in a very similar way. She came in to her first ladyship knowing that she wanted her project to be promoting education and funding libraries. This had been her project when she was first lady of Texas. When her husband was sworn in as governor, she invited Texan writers to Austin for the inauguration even though many were liberal Democrats (Harris 2005, 693-709). She immediately brought this idea to the White House, and hosted an event on inauguration day to celebrate authors and discuss how books shaped the American character (L. Bush 2010, 169).

The inaugural party set the tone for the high level of commitment Laura Bush had to this cause. She planned an early childhood cognitive development conference, and testified before Congress on the results of this conference even though she was not speaking on behalf of a specific legislative agenda (L. Bush 2010, 193). She also focused on attracting people to the profession of teaching. A teacher herself after college, she worked with Teach for America and Troops to Teachers to specifically highlight teacher recruitment. In 2001 she started the Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries, which gives small grants to school libraries. By May of 2005, the foundation had given grants to 428 school libraries nationwide (345). She also started the annual National Book Festival, a broader version of the successful Texas book
festivals she had thrown in the past, in partnership with the Library of Congress and aired on CSPAN (180). Bush invited the wife of Vladimir Putin, head of Russia, to one of these book fairs, who brought the idea back to Russia and planned a book festival there, a huge step for a nation with a history of censorship (272).

Exporting the idea for a book festival to Russia was far from the most important aspect of Laura Bush’s presence in the international realm. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, First Lady Laura Bush became an important face of strength and perseverance for the nation. She gave a radio address specifically speaking to women and children across the country (Harris 200, 693-709). She also spoke on morning shows and wrote letters to elementary, middle, and high school students to explain the events and reassure children that there was goodness in the world (L. Bush 2010, 225-230). When her husband responded to the attacks by invading Afghanistan, Laura Bush became passionate about the living conditions of women and children in Afghanistan, and she gave a presidential radio address on the subject (234). She combined this interest with her work on education by hosting a White House event for Afghan women who were trained to teach in the U.S. At the event, she encouraged these women to share their training with other women when they returned to Afghanistan (274). She worked with the U.S.- Afghan Women's Council, which was a public-private partnership that President Bush and President Karzai established in 2002. She even travelled to Afghanistan, despite it being a time of war (311-312).

Hurricane Katrina refocused Laura Bush and her issue advocacy back in the domestic sphere. For a year after the storm she went to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast nearly every month. She went to evacuation centers, visited children, and worked with the Red Cross to ask for blood donations. She also melded her education work into the storm relief efforts, using her foundation
grants to rebuild libraries and schools throughout the devastated area (L. Bush 2010, 345).

Another natural disaster brought her back into international relief, and she pushed for relief efforts to help the Burmese recover from a cyclone. She found herself in a political predicament when the rulers of Burma at that time refused to accept aid for its people. Bush held a press conference in the White House briefing room calling on the leaders of Burma to accept the aid offered to them (410). This episode of issue advocacy brings up an interesting dilemma for the classification system of this study. Laura Bush called for a government to accept aid, which could be seen as a policy action. However, she did so in the spirit of furthering humanitarian effort from agencies in civil society.

It is clear that war conditions and natural disasters pushed Laura Bush from her comfort zone. From the start of her tenure, it looked as though she would be a first lady just like her mother-in-law. They both had foundations set up in their name to carry out their work, they both worked through school visits, and they both partnered with organizations that already existed in civil society. However, the war made it such that Laura Bush became active in foreign affairs. She advocated for women and children in a humanitarian capacity, keeping the topic firmly within the realm of good mother issues. But there are two points in which Laura Bush walked the line between civil society and policy champion. The first was with her work with the U.S.–Afghan Women’s Council, a body set up by the government. However, she did not advocate for a policy to set this up, but rather, worked within it once it was already established. Also, this work promoted initiatives like training Afghan women to become teachers, which was carried out in civil society not through government action. The second example of a possible policy interaction was her advocacy of aid to Burma, which as explained earlier straddled the line between civil society and policy champion. This case of policy advocacy was not strong enough
to alter her classification as a civil society champion since most of her work, including her main projects, were carried out in this realm. What this does show however, especially in the context of how similar the Bush first ladies were initially, is that there are conditions that may make a traditional issue champion act like a more modern advocate.

The other two women that emphasized the civil society champion aspect of their good mother civil society advocacy were Nancy Reagan and Michelle Obama. In many ways, these two women can be seen as opposites. Reagan served as first lady from 1981-1989, a time of conservative resurgence, and was a representation of the dedicated wife and homemaker. When she took office, she was harshly criticized by the press for being out of touch. On the other hand, Michelle Obama was highly popular and was viewed as an icon for working women, having had a thriving career before becoming first lady in 2009. She was also a barrier breaker rather than a return to normalcy, as she was the first African American first lady. Yet both these women took on similar styles of advocacy. They were completely dedicated to their project, hosting many events and running savvy media campaigns that had a clear connection to an overarching strategy. They also focused on speaking to young people and to parents, advocating that adults are the change-makers for the children around them.

Reagan’s issue advocacy in office defined her public presence for the rest of her life. An article written in tribute after she passed away in 2016 started with the line, “Nancy Reagan may best be remembered for three words: ‘Just say no,’ the motto of her years-long anti-drug crusade,” (Singer 2016). When she became first lady, she was focused on continuing her work with Foster Grandparents, her project when she was first lady of California. Foster Grandparents was a federally subsidized program where low-income elderly people are paid small amounts to care for mentally disabled children. But even as the New York Times covered her announcement
of this project, they added that the most publicized thing about Reagan, “had been not her social awareness, but rather her personal style”, referencing the coverage of her costly inaugural gown, hair styling, and generally expensive taste (New York Times, 10 February 1981). In a later article, they reported, “Just as Lady Bird Johnson was linked with highway beautification, Betty Ford with women's rights and Rosalynn Carter with mental health, Nancy Reagan has, in her first nine months in the White House, become identified with spending money.” She had only done seven events for Foster Grandparents in her first nine months in office, and this was not meeting the public’s standard of work for a first lady’s project (New York Times, 13 October 1981).

Nancy Reagan was constantly being attacked for being “Queen Nancy,” the out-of-touch woman with expensive taste. However, when she started her anti-drug campaign, her frivolous image began to change because she was constantly in the public eye talking about issues that were accessible to people around the nation (Mayo 1996, 264). She says in her autobiography that she realized no matter what she did she would be the subject of attention, so she tried to focus that media attention on the problem of youth drug use (Reagan and Novak 1989, 57). She threw herself into this project, travelling to advocate around the country and visit prevention and rehab centers and schools. She also used her skills from her former career as an actress, appearing on television talk shows, popular teen television shows, and taping Public Service Announcements (Harris 2005, 641 – 653). In 1984 alone, she made 110 appearances and 14 anti-drug speeches, not to mention handing out countless green and white Just Say No t-shirts and buttons to crowds of students. At the end of 1989, more than 12,000 "Just Say No" clubs had been formed worldwide (Singer 2016). She also broadened her program to include international advocacy with her two-day First Lady’s Conference on Drug Abuse in 1985. Eighteen wives of
world leaders attended the conference to discuss the various drug problems facing each nation (Mayo 1996, 265).

By the end of her term, Nancy Reagan was again receiving negative press regarding her control of the president’s staff assignments and her consultations with an astrologist throughout her time as first lady. However, she was still closely associated with her anti-drug program throughout this time. Reagan’s goal was to teach children a proper healthy behavior, which places her project squarely in the zone of good mother advocacy. She went about this by reaching out to parents and schools, even specifically stating that her goal was awareness, not policy (Harris 2005, 641 – 653). Nancy Reagan was a deeply committed good mother civil society champion.

Michelle Obama was a groundbreaking first lady before she made a single move in office. When her husband was elected, she immediately became one of the most prominent women in America, and her many fans had hopes that she would become a White House force in her own right (Slevin 2015, 249). She was a well-educated and successful woman, with degrees from Princeton and Harvard Law, and previous employment in a high level administrative position at University of Chicago Medical Center. But Michelle Obama made it clear early that rather than jump into a project, her first priority was to settle her young daughters into their new lives. She dubbed herself “Mom-in-Chief”, a title that she would carry into her advocacy work (Natalle 2015, 62-64).

Though she did not immediately work on a specific project, Obama used her position as first lady to be an example for young children, particularly young African American girls in underprivileged areas. She announced that her first advocacy priority would be to shine light on impoverished areas in Washington D.C., which she accomplished by visiting schools and telling
children her story. She set up a program during Women’s History Month where accomplished women in D.C. visited schools around the city. This led her to create a more permanent mentorship program that paired high school girls with women who worked in the White House (Slevin 2015, 255-257).

When Obama did settle on healthy living and nutrition as her project, she had a very extensive and planned out advocacy strategy. One of her staff members stated, “It's not sufficient to say we're going to do an event on childhood obesity. There has to be a reason for it. It has to have a beginning and an end and be part of a broader strategy,” (Slevin 2015, 257). This highlights the key to Obama’s issue advocacy, that each action was purposeful. She launched her first foray into food and nutrition by establishing the White House Garden, which was to serve as a symbol of healthy living and the spark for a national conversation about nutrition. At social events, the White House pointed out food that was prepared straight from the garden, turning these social events into an advocacy method (270). Obama also linked the garden to her work with children by inviting local D.C. elementary schools to help her plant and harvest (Natalle 2015, 74). In 2012, Obama wrote a book with a ghost writer about the garden. The book put emphasis on individual action, giving advice for parents, teachers, and communities on how to plant gardens themselves to engage children (Slevin 2015, 271).

The majority of Obama’s issue advocacy was through her project Let’s Move! which launched in February of 2010. The project was focused on ending childhood obesity by changing children’s exercise and eating habits. From the outset, Obama made it clear that this project aimed to engage citizens rather than work through government action. In a speech during the first week of the project, she said, “We're going to need a lot more folks just like all of you to step up to the plate. This isn't about the first lady doing it all. I can't do it by myself. I’m going to need
all of you. We're going to have to work together,” (Natalle 2015, 69). The website of the Let’s Move! program reiterates this idea of personal responsibility in the project, stating, “Everyone has a role to play in reducing childhood obesity,” and, “your involvement is key to ensuring a healthy future for our children,” (“Let’s Move!” 2016).

In this way, Let’s Move! is very similar to Reagan’s anti-drug campaign. They both reached out to parents and named each individual American as the agent of change. They also both used media to reach out to children directly. As mentioned earlier, Nancy Reagan did this by appearing in popular teen television shows to catch high school students’ attention. Michelle Obama had celebrities promote her campaign, the most notable being Beyoncé, who put out a song with lyrics promoting exercise and a music video in which Michelle Obama danced (Slevin 2015, 300). Obama also pitched Let’s Move! by doing a skit with late night host Jimmy Fallon called, “The Evolution of Mom Dancing” that was viewed on YouTube more than 20 million times (325).

Where Reagan and Obama’s advocacy diverge is Obama’s collaboration with private sector industries such as corporate food purveyors, media companies, and pediatricians. The American Academy of Pediatricians developed procedures for BMI measuring, school lunch suppliers pledged to decrease sugar, fat, and salt in foods, and the Food and Drug Administration worked with manufacturers and retailers to make food labels clear (272). Let’s Move! evolved from a public awareness campaign into an organized private-public partnership. There was even a non-profit set up called Partnership for a Healthier America that handled the corporate end of the Let’s Move! program (304). Obama also had smaller issue advocacy projects that were run in the same model as Let’s Move!, such as her program for military families called Joining Forces (295), and her program to promote equal access to higher education called Reach Higher (339).
She expanded the model internationally in March 2015 by partnering with the State Department and other organizations for *Let Girls Learn*, a program focused on removing barriers to women’s education around the world through public-private partnerships (“Let Girls Learn”, 2016).

Although *Let’s Move!* flourished beyond the advocacy of other good mother civil society champions by working directly with private sector companies, it was still functioning outside of the government. Even when working with government agencies like the FDA, as a non-profit program it was a part of civil society, which keeps Obama in the classification of civil society champion, rather than a policy advocate. The key to *Let’s Move!’s* success was exactly that; it did not impose government regulations, but rather promoted voluntary actions of mutual self interest (Slevin 2015, 304). An East Wing aide specifically stated, “Michelle did not want to run the policy herself. That was not her role,” (296). This becomes even more apparent when you look at the possible avenues for policy activity that were not taken. The President signed an executive order that created the Task Force on Childhood Obesity to review policy on nutrition, but Michelle Obama was never involved directly with the task force (272). This stands in contrast to the two Democratic first ladies that came before her, Hillary Clinton and Rosalynn Carter, both of whom were part of task forces in their husbands’ administrations. Obama also had a very strong background in health care policy, but she never stepped into a prominent role as an advocate for the Affordable Care Act (Natalle 2015, 70).

Though the four women presented here are very different women in terms of personality and background, Barbara Bush, Laura Bush, Nancy Reagan and Michelle Obama’s tenures as first lady exemplified how traditional good mother civil society champions could exist in the modern era as active advocates without becoming outright policy champions.
2. Good Mother Policy Champions

This section examines the first ladies that fall under the second classification from the model, good mother policy champion. These women, like all of the previously discussed, remained in the traditionally female realm. However, instead of focusing on civil society, they advocated for legislative and government action. There are two specific models of advocacy used by the four first ladies in this classification, which I refer to as “spokesmothers” and single issue policy champions. Florence Harding and Lou Hoover, who served from 1921-1923 and 1929-1933 respectively, did not have a specific issue for which they advocated. Rather, they advocated as part of their husband’s administrations for the policies that fit within the maternal realm. The other two, Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, who served consecutively from 1961-1969, each found a specific cause that became their primary focus. Despite differences in style, these two pairs of similar advocates are all classified as good mother policy champions.

“Spokesmothers”

Florence Harding and Lou Hoover fall into a category of good mother policy champions deemed “spokesmothers.” Although both of these women had an issue about which they cared deeply, Harding caring for the veterans returning from World War I and Hoover supporting the Girl Scouts, they advocated for other issues apart from their personal causes. Harding and Hoover had close relationships with the press and public personas of their own that allowed them to be spokespersons for certain administration policies. These policies fit with their appeal as motherly figures, which is why they are “spokesmothers.”

When Florence Harding became first lady in 1921, she focused on opening up the White House. This effort spanned from personally joining White House tours and greeting tourists at
the gates, to inviting celebrities and athletes to receptions (Anthony 1998, 267, 271-275). In this effort, she also revolutionized the accessibility of the first lady to the press. Harding said she made, “social calls,” to female journalists, however at such social visits she would consistently answer political questions (Anthony 1991, 1: 387). This increased visibility and celebrity led to an interesting relationship with the press, garnering scrutiny of everything she did, but also forgiveness for mistakes. For example, the press knew that the first lady served alcohol at private parties during prohibition, yet they never wrote about it because they were honored to be invited into the inner circle, and did not want to pass up a glitzy private event with the extraordinary first couple (Anthony 1998, 281, 290-292).

The celebrity status that Florence Harding attained directly impacted her issue advocacy because her actions were more widely viewed and discussed than that of previous first ladies. In her time, Harding was most closely associated with treatment of and relief for World War I veterans. The first lady did not just fundraise and discuss the issue from afar, she also visited veterans weekly at Walter Reed Hospital and hosted them at the White House. She received a steady stream of letters asking for assistance from all over the country, and she worked directly with the newly created Veterans Bureau on some of these cases (Anthony 1991, 1: 391-392).

Though veterans were her prime focus, Harding influenced and supported specific government actions in other areas, leading to her classification as a policy champion. She was openly against the quota system for immigration, causing her to lobbying for admittance of an Italian immigrant child despite reaching the quota ceiling for Italian immigrants. She was also extremely vocal regarding animal cruelty prevention legislation, speaking out on the many debates regarding experiments on animals and anti-vivisection laws. She even personally called the governor of Pennsylvania to lobby against a law mandating pets of illegal immigrants be put
down (Anthony 1998, 309-312). In all of these endeavors, she advocated for with specific plans for a government interaction, rather than going through civil society and volunteers.

A great example of Harding’s interaction with policy is her call for a proposed tariff. At the time, tariffs were very much in the realm of women’s issues (Goss 2013, 99). Harding exemplified how women claimed this issue, using the argument that getting involved will protect families. She stated, "whatever tends to establish our people on a sound economic basis must be of utmost interest to women, for they are the makers of household budgets, the managers of the homes, which in the final analysis are the end and aim of organized society," (New York Times, 22 January 1921). She did not act through civil society by being involved in a women’s organizations to promote her cause, but rather advocated directly as a spokeswoman for the administration policy. Harding’s clear statement as to what the government should do about the tariff, an issue that caregivers cared about, perfectly exemplifies why Florence Harding is a good mother policy champion.

Just as Florence Harding was committed to war veterans, the other “spokesmother,” Lou Hoover, cannot be discussed without mentioning her work with the Girl Scouts. Hoover was president of the organization before she was first lady, and she became “honorary president” when she moved to the White House. Though honorary president could have been just a ceremonial post, Hoover used her position as first lady to raise membership from 200,000 to 500,000 and to fundraise (Young 2004, 113). Hoover’s work with the Girl Scouts was inextricably linked to her general philosophy towards advocacy. Through the Scouts, Hoover promoted women in physical activities and in the political sphere, causes she also highlighted as first lady (Anthony 1991, 1: 436-437). These “scouting values,” were most obvious in Hoover’s
Depression relief efforts, which took up a majority of her focus after the stock market crash in 1929 (Young 2004, 112).

Hoover’s Depression relief efforts pose an interesting challenge for the classification system. In her role as “spokesmother,” Lou Hoover actively promoted the White House agenda. The Hoover Administration policy was a laissez faire approach to the Depression, choosing to allow society to work through its problems without government intervention. Lou Hoover’s role in this policy was to use her position as a mother figure to advocate for volunteers and private action. Though her individual actions, detailed below, sound like civil society interactions, Hoover is in fact a policy champion because her advocacy strategy centered around the administration’s laissez faire approach.

Lou Hoover was no stranger to relief efforts when the Great Depression hit. In London at the outbreak of World War 1, her husband Herbert Hoover was put in charge of the American Relief Committee, and she in charge of the Women’s Relief Committee (Yong 2004, 22). She took on a main coordinating role for the relief effort for Belgium, even travelling back to the U.S. to raise more money and promote the campaign. She also wrote articles and gave speeches throughout the U.S. (Harris 2005, 467-477). When her husband was moved back to the U.S. and put in charge of the Food Administration, Lou Hoover again took an active role in the effort, focusing on the private acts of citizens to boost society (Young 2004, 26). This perfectly exemplifies how Lou Hoover promoted her husband’s policy through civil society action.

What separates Lou Hoover in this time from other wives of prominent men is her active role in the logistics of projects. By the time her husband was elected, she was already a well known public figure in her own right (Young 2004, 42). Hoover’s Depression activism very much mirrored the relief efforts of her past. She remained focused on self-help, encouraged
people to lift themselves out of poverty while encouraging those of means to donate, and attempted to create a network of women’s relief organizations (Young 2004, 94-103).

Hoover is a policy champion because she was a spokeswoman for the administration’s Depression relief policy, a plan that focused on the use of civil society rather than government intervention. She even added policy advisors to her staff, the first time a first lady had done so, and she gave a radio address as a spokeswoman for the administration's Depression relief philosophy (Young 2004, 108). In this speech, she suggested three services women could provide the nation, one of which was to add assistance to movements “legislative or otherwise,” (New York Times, 28 November 1932). The addition of the phrase legislative or otherwise shows that though Hoover was most involved in civil society, she did not stay away from policy advocacy. Rather, it just happened to be that the policy she advocated for aligned with working in civil society. The second part of her classification is that she is a good mother advocate. Though economic policy is not necessarily a traditional feminine issue, Hoover goes about her advocacy consistently focusing on women and children, volunteerism, and other motherly issues. Both Lou Hoover and Florence Harding took on administration policy advocacy from a maternal stance, which is why these, “spokesmothers” are good mother policy champions.

**Single Issue Policy Champions**

The other two first ladies who fall under good mother policy champions changed the face of first lady advocacy. From that point, the 1960s, forward, the expectation was that a first lady must have a project. Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson did not advocate for general administration policies, but rather, each found a single issue on which they focused their attention and efforts.
Though many first ladies had been viewed as celebrities, Jackie Kennedy surpassed them all, becoming an international style icon and capturing attention that made all of her actions in the White House unique. Part of the fascination with the Kennedy family stemmed from their youth. Pregnant during the 1960 campaign, Jackie Kennedy entered the White House with two young children in tow (Mayo 1996, 221-222). A journalist herself before her marriage, Kennedy had a unique relationship with the press. She made herself accessible for stories about arts and fashion; however, she was deeply guarded about her private life and the coverage of her children. To manage the constant media attention, Kennedy was the first first lady to hire a press secretary. Her press secretary, as Kennedy described it, was to be a buffer and protect privacy rather than to generate publicity. However, the presence of a press secretary did lead to a very defined message with regard to the projects she took on (Anthony 1991, 2: 48).

During the transition period, after her husband was elected and before the inauguration, Kennedy publically decided that her project would be bringing fine arts to the White House. This overall project of making the White House a cultural center ended up being split into two parts. First, she set up her own Fine Arts Commission (Harris 2005, 539 – 567). Through this, she promoted a stronger government role in raising artistic and cultural standards throughout the U.S. (Mayo 1996, 225). Her end goal was to lay groundwork for a cabinet post in the model of the French government position Minister of Arts (Anthony 1991, 2: 68).

The second part of her project was a major White House restoration. Other first ladies had changed décor in the White House such that it reflected personal tastes, or so that it was a viable place of residence and business. Jackie Kennedy, however, was not just interested in boosting the appearance or functionality. She took on the task of turning the White House into a museum, a show of U.S. history and culture. She understood that politics was always present
when she made decisions, and she brought on the highly respected Republican Henry du Pont to head the project with her. She also made the effort legitimate by setting up an official nonprofit called the White House Historical Association, on behalf of which she actively lobbied to get congressional approval to receive gifts to this association. She succeeded in getting a law passed in 1961 that legally allowed the publically owned mansion to be run by a nonprofit, known by those in the beltway as “Jackie’s Bill.” It was widely known that Jackie Kennedy was not just a symbolic chair of the restoration project. She also invested a lot of time in it, managed it entirely, and was the one who had final authority over all decisions (Anthony 1991, 28-30). She even came up with the idea to make and sell a guidebook to raise money for the restoration. In February 1962 she gave a televised tour of the White House that reached an estimated three in every four Americans (Anthony 1991, 2: 70). This massive viewership showed that the White House restoration was in fact more than just making the mansion beautiful, but was also a significant cultural action. Jackie Kennedy’s tenure was during the height of the Cold War, so her restoration of the White House was a large display of American wealth, heritage, and pride that carried political implications and furthered efforts to build patriotism.

Chief Usher of the White House J.B. West explains how Jackie Kennedy had a way of persuading people without anyone knowing that she was in fact pushing for something (West 1973, 195). She was known to use her social events to lobby and make relationships with those who she would later ask to help with a project (Eksterowicz and Paynter 2000). After two years completely dedicated to arts and the White House, she took a more relaxed role in 1963 when she was pregnant (West 1973, 270). But even in this time, she was always acutely aware of the politics surrounding her actions, using the constant media attention to subtly push an agenda. For example, she wrote letters to black women’s organizations supporting a memorial for Mary
Bethune, and she visited an overcrowded halfway house in D.C. for mostly black children. She also showed her support for school integration by having the child of a black man in the administration join her children in the nursery school she had established at the White House (Anthony 1991, 2: 90).

Jackie Kennedy’s choice of arts and White House restoration were safely in the category of good mother. When she did branch into civil rights, it was done in terms of children, which kept it in this realm. The designation of policy champion is less clear but is the best way to describe Kennedy’s issue advocacy. Her integration of the White House nursery was done at a time when many schools had not yet taken that step, and it was a clear political message in favor of integration. Even though her main issue, promoting the arts, lends itself easily to private and civil society funding and involvement, Jackie Kennedy worked through policy and government action. She lobbied Congress and established official committees. Though it was not accomplished, her end goal was to garner public support for the creation of a cabinet position for arts, a clear policy goal. For these reasons, Jackie Kennedy is a good mother policy champion.

Lady Bird Johnson directly followed Jackie Kennedy, taking over the role suddenly when President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Johnson felt that her first project should be to follow through on the White House restoration work that Jackie Kennedy had been spearheading (West 1973, 297). She also knew that this would forever be viewed as Kennedy’s and not her project, so throughout this first tumultuous year of her tenure, Lady Bird Johnson searched for a project that could be her own (Harris 2005, 569-587). Johnson hosted “Women Do-ers Luncheons” to promote women’s advancement in various fields, and was the National Chair of Head Start, a War on Poverty program to give education and medical care to underprivileged children (Anthony 1991, 2: 119-121). But it was not until she heard her husband give a speech
on the environment that she focused on beautification. Beautification is defined as a combination of ecology, gardening, landscaping, environmental protection, and urban renewal (122).

Though she did do work with beautification in civil society, she was heavily invested in the policy aspects of this project. She worked directly with the Secretary of the Interior, received environmental briefings, and held legislation and lobbying strategy sessions with West Wing staff. She also assembled the first policy team for a first lady that was dedicated to a single issue. Her team was a mixture of people on her staff and people from the Department of the Interior (Eksterowicz and Paynter 2000). There were two specific policies regarding beautification for which Johnson advocated. The first was for a bill that called for the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue. The second was the Highway Beautification Act, or as it was fondly known, “the Lady Bird bill.” This bill would withhold 20 percent of highway funding if a state did not clean up junkyards, remove billboards, and landscape (Anthony 1991, 2: 136-137). She not only sponsored this bill, but also partly wrote it and made personal lobbying calls on the bill’s behalf (Campbell and McCluskie 2003, 172). President Johnson also worked on her behalf, and is quoted as saying, “I love that woman and she wants that highway beautification act ... by God we're going to get it for her.” When it did pass, Lady Bird Johnson personally chose who became the enforcement coordinator of the new Bureau of Public Roads (Anthony 1991, 2: 137). It is also now known that she influenced almost all of the nearly 200 laws having to do with the environment that came up during her husband's administration (Brower 2016, 144).

Lady Bird Johnson is a clear example of a good mother policy champion. Beautification fits well into the traditionally female sphere of aesthetics and bettering communities. Conservation was the focus of some controversy throughout the 60s, but beautification stayed away from the more energy-focused environmental debates such as those regarding building
Just as Jackie Kennedy had “Jackie’s Bill,” Johnson had “Lady Bird’s Bill,” a clear indicator that she was involved in policy. The fact that these two women have bills named for them also highlights that they each have one specific issue with which they are linked. Though these two first ladies are not the most modern issue advocates, the succession of two good mother policy advocates one after the other changed the standard for first lady’s advocacy as we know it today.

3. Good Citizen Policy Champions

The remaining four first ladies embody the third classification, good citizen policy champions, the most modern classification of issue advocate. As discussed with the good mother policy champions, these are advocates who work through legislative and government action rather than civil society. However, these women differ from the previous 12 discussed because they break the mold of dealing with safely feminine issues. Rather, they take on good citizen issues, those that can be seen as equally in the male or female domain. This category includes the first lady against whom others are measured, Eleanor Roosevelt, the two first ladies during the feminist movement, Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, and the 2016 Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton. These women show that the classification of good citizen policy advocate can lead to very diverse and expansive implementations of advocacy.

The “Yardstick”

Eleanor Roosevelt is one of the most notable human rights advocates in American history; so unsurprisingly, she is one of the strongest policy advocates among first ladies. Eleanor Roosevelt remains the woman to whom all first ladies are compared, “the yardstick,” in
historian Susan Breitzer’s words. Roosevelt did not have a specific project, rather, she took on any issue in which people’s rights were called into question (Breitzer 2009, 30-32).

Much like Lou Hoover, who served directly before her, Eleanor Roosevelt was a public figure in her own right before becoming first lady. The major difference between the women, however, is that Roosevelt was engaged in politics and policy during this time (Breitzer 2009, 31). She was an active member of the League of Women Voters and the New York Democratic Party, campaigning around the state and giving speeches. She was even present as a delegate to the 1924 Democratic Party Convention as the chair for the platform committee on women’s issues (Harris 2005, 479-501). Even while she was first lady of New York, she kept a strong sense of her own priorities, and continued in her job teaching at a school for girls in New York City despite her husband being in Albany (Mayo 1996, 207).

An important facet of Roosevelt’s issue advocacy that developed immediately upon her ascension to the role of first lady in 1933 was her relationship with the press. Within 48 hours of Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration, Eleanor held the first formal press conference of a first lady. She allowed only female journalists to her press conferences, and because she was constantly making news, she advanced many presswomen’s careers. Because Roosevelt was so directly linked to journalists’ careers, the press projected her well in the papers (Anthony 1991, 1: 455-456). It is actually one of these female journalists who encouraged Roosevelt to turn the column she wrote occasionally for a women’s magazine into a daily column that Roosevelt ended up writing 6 days a week from 1936 to her last day in office (Breitzer 2003, 159). These columns often discussed the projects she was working on as first lady, and they became key to her issue advocacy because they reached the public directly, but had the personal feel of a diary (Roosevelt 1978, 193).
At the beginning of her tenure, Roosevelt focused her attention on furthering New Deal policies. With her background working with the underprivileged, this fit naturally into an already developed sense of public service. She headed the women’s division of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and even testified before Congress about welfare institutions in Washington, D.C. (Anthony 1991, 1: 466-468). Testifying before Congress shows a connection to policy that far surpassed that of any previous first lady because it marked Roosevelt as an expert in the fields in which she worked. She was also an advocate for civil rights in a time that this was controversial. She acknowledged how disproportionately the Depression hit African American communities, and even joined the NAACP (Breitzer 2003, 161). One of her most public acts in defiance of segregation was her public resignation from the Daughters of the Revolution because they would not allow black performers in their concert hall (Anthony 1991, 1: 479). Her civil rights advocacy, though not her main focus as first lady, was a widely known and controversial aspect of her activism. She specifically stated that she tried, but was not able to get support for anti-lynching legislation and the removal of the poll tax (Roosevelt 1978, 191). This shows her overall mindset towards advocating for the rights of disadvantaged people in a concrete, policy-based way, even when it was not politically viable.

Eleanor Roosevelt also took on the concerns of young people during the depression. She felt, “it was essential to restore their faith in the power of democracy to meet their needs, or they would take the natural path of looking elsewhere,” (Roosevelt 1978, 206). She spearheaded the development of a New Deal organization called the National Youth Administration, personally writing the entire proposal (Anthony 1991, 1: 463). This project involved her with the American Youth Congress (AYC), and she was severely criticized when it was discovered that the organization had communist ties. She eventually cut ties with the AYC, but people still suspected
her of being a communist even as the AYC picketed the White House calling Roosevelt a sellout (Roosevelt 1978, 208-210). The controversy surrounding the AYC overshadowed her positive work to engage high school graduates in the work to rebuild the nation during the Depression.

Another project in which Roosevelt was completely invested was the Arthurdale settlement. She envisioned a way to help out-of-work miners by making self-sustaining subsistence farming communities (Breitzer 2003, 160). Arthurdale was an experiment, the first of what she hoped would be many places in which former miners could to grow their own food and pull themselves out of economic depression. The project was completely associated with Eleanor Roosevelt, and she bore the criticism when after 6 months the project was deemed too expensive and inefficient to continue (Harris 2005, 479-501). She felt Arthurdale was attacked by Congress before it fully could be tested, and even in hindsight saw the project as a worthy investment. She compared it to rehabilitating the sick or prisoners, saying the community up until that point was being overlooked (Roosevelt 1978, 182-183). This again shows Roosevelt’s deep commitment to helping the disadvantaged.

When World War II broke out, the entire focus of the country shifted from Depression relief to war efforts. Roosevelt balanced her work for a wartime nation with the ideals of the New Deal in her post as co-director of the Office of Civilian Defense. This was the first time a first lady was given a federal job, and her employment by the U.S. government directly opened her up to criticism in a way even her association with the AYC and Arthurdale had not (Harris 2005, 479-501). Her ideas of civil defense were not just traditional volunteerism and morale. She also incorporated ideas about proper nutrition, housing, medical care, education, and recreation for all Americans (West 1973, 34). In addition, she organized a youth division of the Office of Civilian Defense, linking back to her commitment to young people from her years with the
National Youth Administration. As she explained, “I felt it was essential both to the prosecution of the war and to the period after the war that the fight for the rights of minorities should continue,” (Roosevelt 1978, 230). She quickly resigned from her post because the criticism she received overshadowed the work that needed to be done (226). Her activism during the war years became less formal, and she spent a lot of her time being a goodwill ambassador rather than having a formal agenda. Her last day as first lady, the day her husband passed away, started with her announcement that the United Nations and peace were to be her new focus, and that she would attend the first UN conference in San Francisco. This became one of the projects with which she is most associated, although most of the work she did with the UN occurred after she was first lady (Anthony 1991, 1: 510).

Combining all of the work that Eleanor Roosevelt did as an activist while first lady, she is very clearly a good citizen policy champion. She was heavily involved in the New Deal legislative agenda, and even testified before Congress. Within her work with Arthurdale she also was a policy advocate, laying out a strategy for relief that she hoped to turn into a larger government program. Then, as head of the Office of Civilian Defense, she was in a government position herself, a clear indication that she is a policy champion rather than a civil society champion. The classification of good citizen rather than good mother is also warranted. She often discussed her efforts in phrases that make them sound maternal so that they seemed less controversial to the public. However, she dealt directly with economic relief policy and military preparation. Though her base intentions may have been maternal – taking care of all citizens – in practice she went about fulfilling that goal with specific projects outside the realm of traditional women’s issues.
First Ladies during the Feminist Movement

Good citizen policy advocates Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter served back-to-back terms from 1974-1981. Although both strongly supporting the feminist movement of the time, their tenures in office were extremely different.

Betty Ford expressed her opinion on any issue about which she was asked, which became the cornerstone of her advocacy strategy. Because she was known to make news at any moment, she received substantial press coverage. Though Betty Ford was only first lady for a little over two years, historian Mary Linehan tracks a transformation in the role of first lady that stemmed directly from Ford, who realized and effectively used her bully pulpit (Linehan 2003, 54-55).

Betty Ford was thrown into the role of First Lady suddenly. She was second lady for less than a year when President Nixon resigned and her husband was sworn in. Ford immediately drew contrasts to her predecessor, Pat Nixon, by holding a press conference less than a month into her term (Linehan 2003, 59). In her autobiography, Ford discusses how the first question she was asked was what her project would be. She was unprepared for this question, and her advocacy project of promoting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would only later emerge (Ford 1978, 168). However underdeveloped her plan for the first ladyship was, Betty Ford’s agenda was thrown off course when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time that Ford underwent a mastectomy, it was taboo to discuss breast cancer. There was an extreme stigma around the disease, and women feared being considered dirty or disfigured. However, Ford chose to publically discuss in detail her experience with the procedure and chemotherapy. She promoted self-exams, and stressed that it was ok to get checked because ignoring the disease out of fear was killing women throughout the country. The rate of women who got checked and found out about their cancer early enough for treatment surged, and even the second lady of the
United States at the time, Happy Rockefeller, got checked and treated because of Ford’s advocacy (Linehan 2003, 57-59). Ford recounts a powerful moment when she realized that her personal tragedy merged with her role as first lady, writing, “Lying in the hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of me, I'd come to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not my power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help,” (Ford 1978, 194).

Ford channeled this power into her fight for women’s rights and the ERA. When Ford became first lady, the ERA had already been ratified by Congress and 34 states, meaning it only needed to pass in four more states to become law (Linehan 2003, 63). She had been involved in promoting the ERA in her brief time as second lady, and she was excited to commit to the cause from her higher position (Ford 1978, 201). She travelled to states considering the amendment to show her support in person. In addition, she perfected a nuanced style of lobbying, calling state lawmakers directly and using soft-sell tactics (Linehan 2003, 64). She took a family approach to the ERA, emphasizing that she had chosen to be a housewife and that her right to choose this life was what was at the core of the ERA, not forcing women to be career women. This was a very understandable and relatable message for the women of the U.S., and helped Ford combat the attacks against her that were flying from Phyllis Schlafly and the conservative anti-ERA movement. In fact, Ford was the first presidential spouse to prompt a picket outside the White House solely based on her own stance (Anthony 1991, 2: 137 - 141).

Beyond the ERA, her advocacy for women’s rights focused on visibility. When her husband became president, she says that she “worked hard” on her husband for women’s rights (Ford 1978, 202). In January 1975, President Ford signed an executive order establishing the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year. Betty Ford knew that
this had no legal force, but she emphasized the moral force that acknowledging women would have on the nation. At the signing ceremony for the action, the President publicly acknowledged that his wife had been the impetus for the bill (Ford 1978, 202). Betty Ford also pushed her husband to appoint women in his administration, and says that her greatest disappointment as first lady was that she did not do enough research to convince her husband to appoint a woman to the Supreme Court (201-202). Betty Ford also promoted women’s visibility in the public sphere by fundraising for female politicians and advocating for government subsidized daycare so that women could be more able to enter the workforce. She used her status as a homemaker who had risen to prominence to advocate for greater appreciation of homemakers’ contribution to society in the form of Social Security eligibility, with contributions valued at $30,000 a year (Linehan 2003, 61).

Betty Ford is known for her candor, but she did more than just speak her mind. She was an active policy champion with a specific agenda that included the ERA, which was a constitutional amendment, welfare policies, female candidates for government positions, and more. For the purpose of this analysis, feminism is categorized under good citizen policies. Good citizen policies have been defined as those about which men and women can have an equal stake, however, feminism, especially in that time, was dealt with solely by women. Despite being shepherded primarily by women, at that time the ERA and women’s entry into the workforce were the antithesis of traditional maternalism. Since good mother and good citizen have been presented as mutually exclusive, feminism more appropriately falls into the good citizen category, thus labeling Betty Ford as a good citizen policy champion.

Betty Ford’s successor, Rosalynn Carter, immediately picked up the mantle of good citizen policy advocacy. Carter came into office in 1977 knowing that her focus as first lady
would be to continue her work on mental health issues. While first lady of Georgia, Carter
visited hospitals throughout the state and made the policy recommendation to shift funding to
smaller institutions (Harris 2005, 625-639). Carter’s work as first lady of Georgia was well-
known and publicized throughout Jimmy Carter’s campaign for president. A New York Times
article from June of 1976, the election year, discussed that Rosalynn Carter was an active
campaigner who even talked about her own work as first lady of Georgia in speeches promoting
her husband. It explains that she, as a member of the state mental health commission, helped
campaign article, from September of that year, was titled “The Other Carter In the Race” and
focuses on Rosalynn Carter and her record as a public servant as if she in fact were running for
first lady. This article discussed her work with mental health, crediting Rosalynn Carter for her
husband’s administration’s work on mental health, stating that she was active in making

In these campaign speeches on mental health that were so widely covered, Rosalynn
Carter promised the establishment of a presidential commission. Within a month of the
inauguration, she was already working as the Honorary Chair of the Presidential Commission on
Mental Health, with the stated goal of decreasing stigma, raising awareness and funds, and
helping decrease bureaucratic overlap. The commission, with her at the helm, made
recommendations to the president on topics such as changes in Medicare and Medicaid coverage
of mental health treatments and the creation of a bill of rights for anti-discrimination (Anthony
1991, 2: 285-287). Her position was considered honorary solely because of an existing anti-
nepotism statute, a fact that Carter specifically made known to the press, following up with the
quote, “So I'm going to be a very active honorary chairperson,” (Brower 2016, 224). Rosalynn
Carter was the final decision maker on the task force, and was the one who testified before a Senate subcommittee when the issue of mental health came up (Campbell and McCluskie 2003, 173). She helped draft a bill that was submitted to Congress in 1979, working with Rep. Henry Waxman and Sen. Ted Kennedy, even though Kennedy had already launched a primary challenge to her husband’s re-election effort. The bill, called the Mental Health Systems Act, passed in October of 1980 (Brower 2016, 226).

Beyond her main focus, mental health, Rosalynn Carter advocated on a smaller scale for issues as they came up. She worked for the ERA, which failed to pass during her tenure and eventually expired during the next administration. Also, she took on the refugee crisis in Thailand and Cambodia, visiting Southeast Asia and personally asking the UN secretary-general to form the National Cambodian Crisis Committee for private fundraising (Harris 2005, 625-639). Some of Carter’s other efforts included urging for Social Security reform and going on many diplomatic missions (Mayo 1996, 254-258). Most notably, she truly was an active partner in the administration, receiving security briefings, attending cabinet meetings, and conducting meetings with foreign leaders on substantive issues (Harris 2005, 625-639). She is classified by scholars as a complete partner to the president, which mirrors the depth of her issue advocacy and her serious involvement in policy (Eskerwicz and Paynter 2000).

Rosalynn Carter’s goals as first lady are best summed up by a profile piece in the New York Times, “The Importance of Being Rosalynn”, which observed, “she likes to involve herself in what she calls matters of substance” (New York Times, 3 June 1979). Matters of substance, by the author’s definition, are issues that span beyond “pet bills” into issues that are not safely maternal. Mental health could have been approached from the standpoint of making lives better and more comfortable for patients, which would be maternal. However, Carter came at the issue
from the point of view of how to best fund care, how to incorporate care into government programs, and how to promote anti-discrimination, aspects of the issue that are more fitting of the good citizen classification. Furthermore, she also advocated for specific policies and government action through her work on the commission and the passage of the Mental Health Systems Act. Even her smaller advocacy issues included policy, like the ERA and the creation of a UN committee. For these reasons, Rosalynn Carter is clearly a good citizen policy champion.

Examining Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter side by side shows that being a modern advocate in this analysis does not mean that the first ladies do the same thing. Rosalynn Carter was a complete partner to her husband and advocated from a taskforce within the administration. Betty Ford, on the other hand, often conflicted with her husband’s policies or the sentiments of his voting base. These two cases show how even in the same time period, good citizen policy champions can take very different forms.

_The Presidential Candidate_

Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic nominee for President of the United States, former Secretary of State, and former U.S. Senator from New York, was brought into her first national public office by being the wife of the president. But Clinton did not play down her time as first lady during her political career. To the contrary, she even used her work as first lady to justify her run for senate from a state in which she had never lived. She stated that she represented all Americans while first lady, and that she was connected to their concerns because she talked to and received letters from around the nation (Gutin 2003, 284). This was the first time that someone transitioned from the position of first lady into an elected political position. The fact
that Clinton felt her time as first lady prepared her to be an elected representative is a good indication of how she viewed the role of first lady and the advocacy opportunities it presented.

When Bill Clinton was running for President, there was never a doubt that Hillary would play a major role in his administration. He himself billed his candidacy as a “co-presidency” and “two for the price of one” (Gutin 2003, 279). Hillary Clinton had been an active partner while first lady of Arkansas, where she chaired the Arkansas Education Standards Committee and made policy proposals that were controversial (Mayo 1996, 276). Like Rosalynn Carter, who was also active in her husband’s gubernatorial administration, Hillary Clinton campaigned for her husband by specifically stating what she would do if she were first lady. She made health care her priority, even though her husband’s speeches and campaign in general focused on the economy (Harris 2005, 673-691).

The co-presidency became a reality immediately, as Hillary Clinton moved into the White House and moved the office of the first lady from the East to the West Wing with the presidential staff (Eksterowicz and Paynter 2000). Just five days after the inauguration, Bill Clinton named her head of the Task Force on National Health Care Reform (Harris 2005, 673-691). In this capacity Hillary Clinton spearheaded health care reform efforts, drafting a plan that would come to be known as “Hillary Care.” She traveled around the country meeting with healthcare professionals, interest groups, and ordinary people to hear their sentiments on healthcare. In addition, she attended policy strategy meetings, consulted with members of congress, and testified before Congress multiple times (Campbell and McCluskie 2003, 173). She was before Congress not just to bring awareness to an issue, but also to actively advocate for a plan she designed (175).

It was during Hillary Clinton’s tenure that the first lady’s role as an advisor to president
became legally legitimized. The U.S. Court of Appeals decided in *The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons v. Hillary Rodham Clinton* that the office of the first lady is in fact an, “office under the U.S.” (Campbell and McCluskie 2003, 174). This was a major step forward for the legal authority of the first lady, one of only three legal precedents that govern the position (Watson 2000, 70). Unfortunately for Hillary Clinton, this advancement in standing came at the cost of being sued. The lawsuit was one of many scandals and hurdles that Clinton faced in her charge for healthcare advocacy, an issue on which many previous presidents had tried and failed to secure legislation. In the end her healthcare plan failed, and Hillary Clinton lost a very high stakes game of politics that limited her ability to effectively advocate (Gutin 2003, 280).

Though health care is the issue on which most of Hillary Clinton’s advocacy efforts were focused, after the bill’s failure she continued to advocate for other issues. Her focus shifted to child welfare, a cause about which she has been passionate since her first job out of law school at the Children’s Defense Fund (Mayo 1996, 276). She organized two White House task forces, one on early childhood education, the issue that she championed as first lady of Arkansas, and the other on childcare. The first presidential proposal of her husband’s second term as president was a $20 billion program to improve childcare for working families and for afterschool programs. This policy was based on the proposals of Hillary Clinton’s task forces, but she did not take on the role of main spokesperson for the policy like she had for healthcare (Harris 2005, 673-691). She also worked behind the scenes on the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, which she only took credit for during her subsequent campaigns (*New York Times*, 11 August 2000). Even in the midst of scandal and criticism, in 1995 Hillary Clinton advocated for women and children at a U.N. Conference in China. She forcefully condemned the human rights violations that were occurring, famously quoted as stating, “human rights are women’s rights. And women’s rights
are human rights,” (Gutin 2003, 281). As the Monica Lewinsky scandal began to take root and impeachment hearings ensued, it became difficult for Hillary Clinton to advocate as intensely as in the past. Instead, her public persona became more aligned with the traditional approach to the role. She wrote a book about children and family called *It Takes a Village* that was published in 1996, and she spent two years calling attention to the plight of children (281). She also wrote a column called “Talking it Over” that was very similar to Eleanor Roosevelt’s “My Day” (280).

Hillary Clinton’s issue advocacy started at full force when she jumped into her task to make a healthcare plan. It is in this role that she performed her most notable issue advocacy, and it is here that she earns her classification of good citizen policy champion. Healthcare is a good citizen issue because it was not seen as a woman’s issue, but rather, was a policy challenge that former presidents had spearheaded. As her term progressed, Clinton remained a policy advocate with her work on education and childcare, but these are two issues that retreat into the good mother category. By the time of her husband’s impeachment, Clinton was not only maternal rather than good citizen, but was also no longer a policy champion. Her time calling attention to the plight of children was reminiscent of the public wives rather than “the yardstick” Roosevelt who she hoped to emulate. After this total transformation from modern to traditional, Hillary Clinton upended the paradigm of what could be expected from a first lady by running for Senate while still wife of the sitting president. Her issue advocacy became those in her senatorial campaign platform and stump speeches, a concept that shatters the conception of how first ladies can advocate for issues from within their role. Clinton earned the classification of good citizen policy advocate because of her work with healthcare. However, her progression from modern advocate to a traditional figure and back to modern again illuminates external factors that allow for a first lady to be a certain type of advocate.
4. Good Citizen Civil Society Champions

The fourth and final category in the traditional to modern classification model is the good citizen civil society champion. However, none of the first ladies from 1921 to 2016 fit within the classification of good citizen civil society champion. This hypothetical issue advocate would work through private and volunteer methods for issues that are outside the realm of traditional motherhood. On the model, this classification was to be viewed as a midpoint from traditional to modern, equal to good mother policy advocacy. It seems as though it was easier to transition into modernity via the type of advocacy, namely policy over civil society, than via the actual issue topic. This study will not look to further examine why this classification does not exist in practice within the set of first ladies studied herein.

DISCUSSION

The central question of this study is how and why has the first lady’s issue advocacy evolved since female suffrage? The first part of this question, how the advocacy has evolved, can be answered based on the classification of the 16 first ladies that have served since suffrage.

First ladies’ issue advocacy has not progressed linearly with time from traditional to modern.

Traditional and modern are words that are often associated with temporal progress. Therefore, the assumption underlying the hypothesis was that first ladies’ issue advocacy would progress linearly from traditional to modern. However, after classifications were assigned, it became clear that this was not in fact the case. Figure 2, which can be seen on the following page, displays the classifications graphically, with the x-axis representing years and the y-axis representing the classifications. The most traditional classification is presented lowest on the y-
axis and the most modern is highest. The first ladies, as denoted by their initials, are marked along the graph at the intersection of the time in which they took office and their classification.

Figure 2 clearly shows that there is no linear pattern from traditional to modern. In fact, the two most recent first ladies fell into the most tradition classification. Only one of the first four cases was classified as the most traditional style of advocate, yet this is true for three of the last four first ladies. Rather than a linear progression, there seems instead to be a periodic nature to the graph that creates multiple peaks. The four most modern advocates, the good citizen policy champions, are in three distinct time periods, not aggregated at the end of the time frame. The hypothesis posited that first ladies’ issue advocacy would progress from traditional to modern over time. Based on the results presented above, this hypothesis is false.

**Figure 2. First Ladies’ Issue Advocacy Over Time**

The peaks in modernity coincide with times of women’s advancement.

As discussed above, the graph shows that the most modern advocates fall into three distinct periods. The first is the tenure of Eleanor Roosevelt from 1933-1945, which encompasses the Great Depression and World War II. In this time, women were moving out of the homes because of economic necessity or the need to fill jobs during war. This gave women a
much more public presence in traditionally male dominated spaces (Goldin 1991). The second spike of modern issue advocacy, represented by Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, was during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Represented best by the fight for the ERA, a piece of legislation that both of these first ladies supported, the 70s saw a huge out pouring of advocacy for women’s rights and calls for recognition of women’s activities outside of the home. In fact, in the 1970s half of married white women were working outside of the home (Goss 2013, 50). Also during this time period, women’s rights groups such as the National Organization of Women were opening lobbying offices in Washington (55). The last of the modern advocacy peaks, represented by Hillary Clinton, was in the 1990s. After the conservative backlash of the 1980s, the 90s was a time where political and cultural events brought feminism back into the forefront of society (63). The confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court despite accusations of sexual harassment brought women’s groups back into the public eye. It also motivated many women to run for office themselves, and 1992, the year Bill Clinton was elected president, became known as “the year of the woman” because the number of women in the U.S. Senate tripled from two to six women (14 Women 2007).

The peaks in modern advocacy displayed in figure 2 occur during moments in history when there were surges in women’s presence in the public sphere. That is not to say that these were the only times that women were actively engaged in policy or agenda setting. In fact, analysis of congressional testimony by women’s organizations suggests that the 1950’s was an important decade of women’s testimony (Goss 2013, 33). However, is not the actual level of activity that makes the three time periods of the modern advocates stand out, it is that women were most visibly in public spaces in these times. It is the public perception of women’s activity that created the opportunity for first ladies to engage in modern advocacy.
Time periods allow for the spikes in modernity, but do not mandate it.

It is important to make a distinction between time periods causing a first lady to be modern, and time periods allowing for more modern advocacy. The context in which a first lady serves can allow her space to transition into good citizen politics, as discussed above. However, if a first lady is not engaged in politics and policy, she may not use the opportunity that her time period affords her.

The two reluctant public women, Bess Truman and Pat Nixon, display this concept of how the historical context of a first lady can allow for but not cause modern advocacy. Bess Truman took over as first lady when Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945. The war was still being fought in the Pacific, and Truman could have used Eleanor Roosevelt’s precedent of being an active first lady in the space allowed by wartime women’s mobilization. Bess Truman was involved in political decisions, “the boss” as her husband called her (West 1973, 77). But she chose immediately to be out of the public eye, forgoing an advocacy agenda. Not only did Truman choose not to follow in Roosevelt’s manner, she actively rejected it. A press conference had been scheduled for her after she took office so that she could meet the female reporters with whom Roosevelt had developed a close relationship. Truman actively postponed and then cancelled the press conference, stating instead that she would not be a public figure (New York Times, 18 April 1945).

One might conclude that her personal history was a factor in this decision. Truman’s father took his own life when she was 18 years old, and the incident was covered on the front page of her town’s local newspaper. She never recovered from having her personal tragedy made so public, and from this stemmed an obsession with privacy that could explain why she chose not to be a public, modern advocate like her predecessor (Harris 2005, 501-519). Early in Bess
Truman’s 1945-1953 tenure, World War II ended and women were either replaced in the workforce with men returning from the war, or retreated into the homes to start families. Though this latter part of her tenure was not a climate conducive to modern advocacy, while Truman was serving in the same climate as Roosevelt, she rejected the opportunity to be a modern advocate.

Pat Nixon also specifically removed herself from the being an active public advocate. Nixon was first lady from 1969-1974, a time of resurgence in women’s involvement in the public sphere. Although she followed two moderately modern advocates, Kennedy and Johnson, and preceded two of the most modern advocates, Ford and Carter, Nixon chose a traditional strategy. The New York Times stated that, “the First Lady's impact on the nation had been, relatively speaking, unimpressive,” (New York Times, 13 September 1970). Nixon explains her view of her role as first lady when she stated, “I just want to go down in history as the wife of the President,” (New York Times, 26 January 1976). It was with this mindset of hoping to escape history that she actively rejected the space her moment in history provided her.

**Personality can determine traditional behaviors but is not a determinant of modernity.**

Personality can explain why Bess Truman and Pat Nixon were traditional advocates despite serving in times that allowed for modernity. However, it seems as though personality cannot permit a first lady to act in a modern way if the environment does not allow for it. This point can be illustrated by analyzing Hillary Clinton’s time as first lady. Though it is difficult to define a “modern personality” across this time frame, Clinton is being stipulated as having a modern personality based on her successful law career, her choice to be a working mother, her active role in policy while first lady of Arkansas, her “co-president” status, as Bill Clinton called it, and her later political career culminating in being a candidate for president.
As discussed in the results, Clinton received the modern classification of good citizen policy champion based on her work in healthcare at the start of her tenure. However, after her healthcare plan failed, she had lost most of her political capital. Additionally, a wave of backlash against the Clinton administration allowed Republicans to take back control of Congress in 1994. The time period that had allowed her to perform modern advocacy had ended. This is why her next project, child welfare, was a good mother policy issue, a step more traditional in the classification system and more easily accepted by the public. By late in her term, during multiple scandals and her husband’s impeachment hearings, she switched to a good mother civil society champion with her book about child rearing. She no longer had the opportunity to be a modern advocate. Rather, she was the wife who stood by her husband. Clinton herself did not become a less modern woman in this time, as proven by her run for senate at the end of her time as first lady. Therefore, it was not personality that determined when she used traditional or modern advocacy strategies, but rather the environment in which she found herself at various times during her term.

Another case that disproves personality as a determinant of modernity is Michelle Obama. Obama had degrees from Princeton and Harvard Law, and held a high level administrative position at University of Chicago Medical Center (Natalle 2015, 62-64). When she took over as first lady it was the first time in her adult life that she did not have a paying job (Brower 2016, 42). Obama became a national icon as soon as her husband was elected, and many of her fans and supporters wanted her to take on a large role in the White House (Slevin 2015, 249). However, the context in which she served did not allow for it, in large part because she was the first African American first lady. She understood the symbolism that defined her role, and knew that her actions reflected not only on her, but on all black women. As her biographer
writes, “no one who looked like them had occupied the White House.. a fact that would influence what Barack and Michelle would do and say,” (Slevin 2015, 247-249). Obama specifically stayed in a traditional realm of advocacy in order to lower the chance of criticism. Addressing childhood obesity was something that most people should have been able to agree was a positive action for the nation. However, she was called a hypocrite by her husband’s political enemies, who claimed her body shape meant she did not have the authority to speak about healthy living (274). Michelle Obama did not have the space to be a modern advocate even though she had a long background of being a modern woman. Rather, she acted as a traditional advocate in order to navigate the racism and sexism she faced (287).

**CONCLUSION**

The first lady of the United States is in many ways an under-examined role. This study has expanded the current scholarship on first ladies by examining the issue advocacy of each of the women who served in the role since female suffrage. Using a model that defined traditional and modern through examining both topic and style of advocacy, each first lady was assigned to a classification. A detailed analysis of the advocacy of the first ladies that fell within each category painted a broad picture of a diverse range of advocacy styles, even within each individual classification. The results clearly disproved the hypothesis that first ladies issue advocacy progressed linearly from traditional to modern over time. Rather, there were multiple peaks in modernity that mirrored the periods of women’s advancement in general society. However, serving in one of these time periods did not mandate that a first lady be modern. First ladies whose personalities were private and reserved in nature did not use the opportunity that the historical context of their tenure allowed. However, personality was not a complete
determinant of advocacy behavior because an assertive personality could not create the opportunity for modernity when society at large was not open to female advancement.

This analysis of the role of first lady comes at a particularly appropriate time because this year, 2016, a former first lady, Hillary Clinton, was selected to be the Democratic candidate for President of the United States. Even prior to her candidacy, Clinton had changed how a first lady is viewed. As discussed, when Clinton ran for the U.S. Senate, she shattered any conceptions of the way first ladies were supposed to proceed after leaving their role. She actively referred to and used her time as first lady as an asset throughout her career in politics, beginning with treating it as a political experience that qualified her to run for Senate. The way she embraced her time as first lady as significant experience as she rose in politics had a clear impact on how First Lady Michelle Obama is viewed. Michelle Obama became a powerful advocate for the Democratic Party and for Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign. In fact, a large portion of the coverage of Obama since her speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention has been dedicated to speculating whether she will be running for office herself. The tone of these articles is best summed up by the title of an article called, “If Michelle Obama ran for office, Democrats would roll the ‘red carpet’ out for her” (Washington Post, 26 July 2016). Not only is Obama being considered a viable candidate; she is actually being highly encouraged to run. This coverage of Obama as a candidate is in spite of consistent comments from Obama that she will never run for office. In fact, CNN wrote an article specifically about the timeline of how often she has expressed disinterest in public office (Zaru 2016). Regardless of whether she seeks office, the widely acknowledged notion that a first lady can jump into being a candidate herself shows an increased acceptance of the first lady as a political figure in her own right. If the public
accepts that the first lady can participate in politics, first ladies may not be limited in the future to periods of women’s movements in order to perform modern issue advocacy.

The Clinton presidential run has put into focus an even larger question regarding the future of the role of first lady by making the public consider the prospect of a man in the role of presidential spouse. This brought into the light concerns about the gendered nature of the role, and what that means for a society in which women have advanced in traditionally male fields such as law, medicine, corporate governance, and even running for president themselves. The first ladyship used to provide an opportunity for women to advance in politics. Now that women are advancing on their own merit, the first ladyship may do more to constrain women than empower them. Though women’s advancement, especially in politics, can be charted as steadily increasing over time, this study found that four of the last five first ladies have been traditional issue advocates. Considering Bill Clinton, a former president, in the role of presidential spouse has brought to the forefront how this role can be constraining. Should a former president be picking out china patterns for state dinners? Moreover, is it fair to ask women who have had long and accomplished careers in and of themselves to give up their careers to be the wife of the president? Can the first lady choose to continue in her chosen field, and not act as the hostess of the White House? If the first lady is not in charge of running the White House, what exactly do we expect from her, or him? American society may very well need to readdress how we define this traditional role of First Lady of the United States in the modern era.
REFERENCES


