

## A Comparison of Michelle Obama and Nancy Reagan

Courtney Sage

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### Introduction

The duty of the First Lady has not been defined throughout the history of United States Presidents. It is a position only created through title; however, this position yields a tremendous amount of power. The institution of the First Ladyship over time has been molded by its predecessors and established based on the popular expectations that are created in response to the previous models<sup>559</sup>. A First Lady has a unique opportunity within the political world. She is able to generate involvement over different societal issues and create it into a political issue without being elected into office. Since Eleanor Roosevelt set the stage as a formal First Lady activist, many First Ladies have taken up different positions regarding political or social issues. Eleanor Roosevelt also instilled the growing trend of media coverage about the First Lady. The wives of the President receive massive amounts of media attention through entertainment broadcasting, as well as news channels.<sup>560</sup> With the title of First Lady and the massive media coverage, a First Lady has the ability to find success within her political or social initiatives; however, this relationship can also create failure. Understanding the relationship between public opinion and the First Lady's political role allows us to better understand the First Lady institution and the power she may hold.

### The First Lady Comparison of Obama and Reagan's Initiatives

How does the public opinion of the First Lady affect the outcome of the initiative she is campaigning? To explain this relationship, it is necessary to understand the expectation of the First Lady and how the media portrays her role. The public opinion is developed through the information provided by the media outlets they pursue. Looking at current First Lady, Michelle Obama's, Let's Move Initiative and Nancy Reagan's Just Say No to Drugs Initiative, a comparison can be made. These two issues, healthy living and drug use prevention, were pointed towards children and would not be considered political issues. Through research, I have examined the popularity of both First Ladies, as well as the success of their initiatives. With this information, I argue that the use of positive media coverage helped create the success these ladies had with their initiatives. The positive reaction from the public is related to the direct media coverage created by the First Ladies, such as interviews and television commercials. By using these media outlets, the First Ladies were able to educate the masses in order to gain the support to continue their projects.

### Literature Review

There is no direct research comparing the work of Nancy Reagan and Michelle Obama. However, in order to better understand the projects they created, I researched background information about the individuals, as well as information about their impact as First Ladies. I also gathered information examining the role of the First Lady, finding role constraints. She is expected to be the devoted spouse, yet also exuberate a sense of independence and authority<sup>561</sup>. While maintaining this image, the study conducted by Erica Scharrer and Kim Bissell shows that First Ladies being politically active are seen in a negative tone.<sup>562</sup> However, there have also been studies

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<sup>559</sup> Gary D. Wekkin, "Role Constraints and First Ladies." *The Social Science Journal* 37 no. 4 (2000): 601.

<sup>560</sup> Barbara Burrell, Laurel Elder, and Brian Frederick. "From Hillary to Michelle: Public Opinion and the Spouses of Presidential Candidates." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 no. 1 (2011): 156 – 176.

<sup>561</sup> Wekkin, "Role Constraints and First Ladies," 607.

<sup>562</sup> Kim Bissell and Erica Scharrer, "Overcoming Traditional Boundaries," *Women and Politics* 21, no. 1 (2008): 81.

showing an evolution of the First Lady Office toward political integration within the White House.<sup>563</sup> Focusing on Michelle Obama, Caroline Brown wrote an article explaining the position of the First Lady within the political world. Brown argued that the brand of Obama was focused around “Mommy Politics”.<sup>564</sup> This interpretation of Michelle Obama fits in with the Let’s Move initiative, an initiative that is noncontroversial and heavily focuses on the children of the United States. Nancy Reagan also was expected to be a strong role model but without appearing stronger than her husband, Ronald Reagan. First Lady Reagan’s situation also could explain the choice to focus on a campaign to prevent drug use among children. While there has been information and research about the programs and First Ladies themselves, there is a lack of information that allows us to understand why they were able to find success within these programs.

### **Historical Context**

First Ladies are often scrutinized in the media when creating or campaigning for a particular societal issue. First Lady Nancy Reagan faced early backlash in 1982 with her anti-drug program. People criticized her lack of grasp of the problem and also pointed to her husband cutting 26% from the budget for educational programs dealing with drug prevention.<sup>565</sup> This beginning failure there was little use of the media besides coverage from her visiting the rehabilitation centers. Reagan understood the necessity of gaining the media on her side and used it to her advantage in order to gain support for her cause. Starting in 1983, she began to star in different music videos and television shows promoting the program. She also used the status of other celebrities, such as Abdul-Jabbar and Michael Jackson, by getting them involved. One of Reagan’s most successful publicity stunts was at halftime of Super Bowl XVII where she made an announcement to over 112 million people about her cause.<sup>566</sup> With the ever-growing publicity, the First Lady was able to help create over 5,000 “Just Say No to Drugs” clubs by the end of 1984.<sup>567</sup> The success within a two-year span of her program can be thanked by the amount of positive mass media coverage. Using the media to create a positive public opinion helped to create the success of her program, as well as to create a more positive image of the First Lady herself.

Michelle Obama began her reign as First Lady with much controversy and curiosity. As the first black First Lady, there were expectations of her to help the poor black community. More often than not, the early media coverage of First Lady Obama focused on her fashion sense rather than her as a person or her views despite her success in the professional world. The “Let’s Move” campaign began in 2009 to reshape the way children eat and exercise. Obama’s program also began with some backlash specifically with the Republican Party. People were worried about First Lady Obama using this program as an agent of big government by becoming the “food police” telling parents what they must serve their children. She also faced criticism from the food industry by complaining about the marketing of junk food.<sup>568</sup> To improve the outlook of her program, she also went to the media. Using some of the same tactics as Reagan, Obama created commercials, gained celebrity backing, as well as created a Twitter feed where she would answer questions regarding her program. The popularity of this media blitz has heavily influenced the success of her

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<sup>563</sup> Anthony J. Esterowicz and Kristen Paynter, “The Evolution of the Role and Office of the First Lady: The Movement Toward Integration with the White House Office.” *The Social Science Journal* 37 no. 4 (2000): 559.

<sup>564</sup> Caroline Brown, “Marketing Michelle: Mommy Politics and Post-Feminism in the Age of Obama.” *Comparative American Studies* 10, no. 2-3 (2012): 250.

<sup>565</sup> Pierre-Marie Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan: The Woman Behind the Man* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2014), 103.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>568</sup> Sheryl Stolberg, “Childhood Obesity Battle is Taken Up by First Lady,” *The New York Times* 10 Feb. 2010, 16.

campaign. The program has created vegetable gardens promoting healthy eating, raised awareness about the issue of child obesity, and had improvements for the school meals nationwide.<sup>569</sup> Possibly one of the greatest accomplishments Obama has seen is in the private sector, where businesses such as Walmart and Walgreens agreed to build or expand their stores to sell more fresh fruit and vegetables in communities who otherwise would not have the option.<sup>570</sup> Both of these First Ladies knew the momentum needed to gain positive support for their programs and with the use of the media saw success.

### **Hypothesis**

Examining the above information about these two successful programs proves using the media as a campaigning outlet allows for the First Lady to be successful in her endeavors specifically in regards to the different societal issues she may be promoting. This success refers to the reaction by the public about the program, as well as the outcomes of the program. To test the hypothesis that creating one's own media promotion leads to greater success of the program, I examined different media outlets, such as newspaper articles and public opinion polls, to understand the media campaign and draw conclusions regarding how the success of the First Lady's initiative was effected. If there is a relationship between the media and the success of the program, there will be evidence suggesting that the success began after the usage of media.

### **Data and Measurements**

The information regarding the First Ladies' programs comes from different newspaper articles, such as the New York Times. These articles were from the opinion or editorial section. For example, Emanuel wrote to the New York Times commending Michelle Obama's campaign for changing the food sector's approach to children.<sup>571</sup> He also states his belief that the "Let's Move" program will help push towards a decline in childhood obesity rates.

I also have used interviews and articles written by the First Ladies. In 1986, Nancy Reagan gave a speech before the World Affairs Council in regards to the battle against drugs. She gives direct information about the program and cites a letter written by a young girl and her opinion of the program. This information gives another insight to how the First Lady used the media in order to gain support. With information such as this, I am able to observe the public opinion about the First Ladies and their initiatives, using Gallup Poll. The Gallup Poll provided information about the First Ladies before their campaigns began, as well as after. With this information, I am able to measure how the public opinion may have grown or declined for the First Lady.

### **Analysis**

In 1981, a poll found 28% of the United State citizens viewed Nancy Reagan as favorable, while 10% viewed her as unfavorable. The remaining 62% responding that they did not know yet.<sup>572</sup> With a poll such as this, it is reasonable to assume that Reagan was relatively unknown to the public. She began her anti-drug campaign in late 1982 and by 1986 over 5 million people participated in the "Just Say No" marches in seven hundred cities. Reagan had traveled over one hundred thousand miles visiting different schools and rehabilitation centers. Within the media, she had given 1,254 interviews, appeared on over twenty talk shows, and delivered forty-nine speeches.<sup>573</sup> After such an intense media blitz, by the 1985 New York Times/CBS poll Nancy

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<sup>569</sup> Ezekiel J. Emanuel, "Let's Move, She Said- and We Have," *The New York Time*, 13 Feb. 2012.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> "A Look Back at the Polls," CBS News, last modified 2004, accessed November 30, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-look-back-at-the-polls>

<sup>573</sup> Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan*, 104.

Reagan had earned a 71% favorability rate and a 14% unfavorable rate; a reflection on the program, too. With so many people supporting the cause, there was a drop in addiction among high school students from one third to one fourth. There was also a survey conducted in 1985 and three fourths of high school seniors called marijuana harmful.<sup>574</sup> While the Reagan administration faced criticism on fighting the war on drugs, there is evidence showing how the First Lady's program was able to be successful through the media. The media blitz also gave Reagan a large 43% change in her favorability rate within four years.

Michelle Obama entered the political scene with a high favorability rating of 72% in 2009.<sup>575</sup> However, despite this high rating, she too would undergo much criticism. With her "Let's Move" campaign, First Lady Obama has had many interviews, television appearances, and a social media blitz. The results the program has seen have been quite surmountable. In a 2013 interview with *The Nation's Health*, she stated that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data with a decline in childhood obesity rates.<sup>576</sup> As the program continues, Obama has still held a high approval rating. As of March 2014, a poll found her rating to be at 66%. This approval rating is a 6% drop; however, this is over a nine-year period unlike Nancy Reagan's four year difference.<sup>577</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From the analysis of the data compiled, it is clear both Nancy Reagan and Michelle Obama were able to use the media to their own advantage in order to gain support. The support they gained allowed them to find success with their programs: high awareness and physical results. In terms of who has had better success, Obama's "Let's Move" campaign has resulted in more tangible things happening, such as a change in marketing by large businesses, a decline in the obesity rate, and a change in school lunches. Reagan only saw a large amount of awareness and a rise in educational programs about drug prevention. In regards to the relationship between the opinion polls and the success for the programs, it is clear the media did help promote the program and the First Lady. After creating a media campaign, Reagan saw a higher favorability rating. Obama did see a lower rating; however, her rating was over a longer period of time, and this rating was very minute. Overall, she is still highly favored by the public and continues to find results with her program. Both of these women were expected to take on the role of the First Lady and face the expectations former First Ladies had created. They used their role to combat a societal issue to help the public without becoming another political agent. Unfortunately, there is not much research looking into these programs and how the media has affected them; however, I believe more studies could be conducted to see how impactful the media blitz are to the public. This research also opens up questions for interpretation on the role of the First Lady and if different programs or campaigns used by First Ladies would benefit from using the media to sway public opinion. This research is a stepping-stone of a larger issue. It can lead us to look for a larger relationship with the media and the First Lady, as well as public opinion.

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<sup>574</sup> Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan*, 105.

<sup>575</sup> Jeffery M. Jones, "Michelle Obama's Favorable Rating Eclipses her Husband's; Both President and First Lady are Quite Popular," *Gallup Poll News*, 2 April 2009.

<sup>576</sup> Charlotte Tucker, "Q&A with First Lady Michelle Obama: How the Let's Move! Campaign is Changing the Way Kids Eat." *The Nation's Health* November-December, 5 2013, 5.

<sup>577</sup> Alyssa Brown, "Michelle Obama Maintains Positive Image; Average Favorable Ratings Tops Hillary Clinton's as First Lady," *Gallup Poll News*, (2014).