FROM WIFE TO PRESIDENTIAL PARTNER: THE POLICY AGENDA OF THE FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

First ladies are prominent public persons, arguably even among the most influential non-elected representatives of the American public. This article presents an analysis of the first lady's relationship with policy problems in the period 1945-2013 on the basis of a content analysis of New York Times articles, applying the topic classification system developed within the Comparative Agendas Project. It finds that first ladies are increasingly associated with policy over time; that they are associated primarily with so-called compassion issues; that they have a rather diversified agenda; that her agenda has no real relation to the president's; and that there are no clear partisan divisions. Over time, the first lady has become a stronger policy advocate and political partner to the president.

INTRODUCTION

Much is speculated about the role of the first lady of the United States in policy formation: is she simply inspiring the president to get up in the morning, does she advise him on how to rule the nation, or does she have her own policy agenda? First ladies are prominent public persons, arguably even among the most influential *non-elected* representatives of the American public. First ladies also are seen as representative of the role of women in U.S. society (Watson 2000; Wertheimer 2005) Furthermore, previous research suggests that this position has become more politicized (Watson 2000; Burns 2008) What is less known, thus far, is how the first lady's scope of attention to various policy problems has developed. In her broad representative role, does she stay low key and speak mainly about compassion issues, or does she assume her own space in setting the policy agenda?

This article presents an analysis of the first lady's relationship with policy problems in the period 1945-2013 on the basis of a content analysis of *New York Times* articles. When the

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first lady is mentioned, is this in conjunction with policy issues? And if this is the case, what patterns can be found in the types of policy topics, the scope of attention, and the relationship to her husband's political party?

Although previous work—also based on content analysis—has examined the framing of the first lady as a public figure, there is no extensive research taking a longer time span. Mueller (2010) for example criticizes Burns (2008) for only focusing on election and inaugural years. Studies thus far focus on specific first ladies, in particular on Hillary Clinton, and they provide overall pictures of the role of the first lady. Even when described in terms of political activism or even politicization, previous work has not thoroughly explored *which* policy topics were ascribed to the first lady and how this has evolved over time.

The research reported in this article addresses these substantive questions about the development of attention to policy problems by the first lady in the United States. In addition, it looks at how this attention fits or differs from the formal political agenda in the United States. The research uses a dataset built on the basis of a content analysis of articles published in the *New York Times*, applying the topic classification system developed within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) for its data collection. The topic coding system of the Comparative Agendas Project has been used for analyzing and comparing policy agendas in the United States and abroad (see, for example: Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2015). The CAP-coding system has not yet been applied to first ladies (nor to functional equivalent positions in other countries). This coding system is employed to collect data on twelve first ladies since 1945 until 2013, including Michelle Obama's first term as first lady but excluding her second term as well as Melania Trump's term in office. Table 1 presents the chronology of first ladies.

Table 1. Chronology of First Ladies and Presidents of the United States Post-1945

First Lady	President	Years Served
Bess Truman	Harry S. Truman	1945-1953
Mamie Eisenhower	Dwight Eisenhower	1953-1961
Jacqueline Kennedy	John F. Kennedy	1961-1963
Lady Bird Johnson	Lyndon B. Johnson	1963-1969
Pat Nixon	Richard Nixon	1969-1974
Betty Ford	Gerald Ford	1974-1977
Rosalynn Carter	Jimmy Carter	1977-1981
Nancy Reagan	Ronald Reagan	1981-1989
Barbara Bush	George H. W. Bush	1989-1993
Hillary Rodham Clinton	Bill Clinton	1993-2001
Laura Bush	George W. Bush	2001-2009
Michelle Obama	Barack Obama	2009-2017*
Melania Trump	Donald Trump	2017-2021**
Jill Biden	Joe Biden	2021-***

* Barack Obama was elected into office for a second term, but only his first term is covered here.

** and *** not included in data collection for this article.

This article begins with a discussion of the ways in which the first lady of the United States has been studied, presenting what is still missing from the academic discourse. Next, the approach to study the first lady's role from an agenda setting perspective is explained, with a set of hypotheses to begin exploring the policy profile of first ladies in the United States. The article then discusses whether attention given by the first lady to major or minor topics is really substantive and whether it relates to more general patterns of political agenda setting in the United States. Then the article moves on to data collection and analyzes empirical patterns from 1945 to 2013. The conclusion suggests opportunities for further research.

EXISTING RESEARCH ON U.S. FIRST LADIES

While an institution, for formal and mostly obvious reasons the position of the first lady in the United States signifies no active role in political agenda setting. In order to see to what extent this institutional position seconding the president actually involves attention to public policy problems, it is necessary to consider the way the first lady has been reported in the media, in particular in the press. Winfield (1997) describes four ways in which the press has framed the first lady, going from *escort* (without independent function) to *protocol* (a ceremonial role) to *noblesse oblige* (supporting volunteerism and the community) to *policy*. She starts with the first presidential wives, only including the first year in office of Roosevelt, Kennedy and Clinton from the twentieth century first ladies in her sample. Her finding is that throughout history newspapers have been critical of any political or policy role, and that first ladies are expected to highlight the first three roles even in the twentieth century.

Watson (2000) observes Johnson, Ford, Carter, Reagan, B. Bush and Clinton as active 'presidential partners' engaging in political activism. His detailed compilation of analyses of all first ladies before 2000 leads to the conclusion that first ladies are becoming more political. Similarly, Burns (2008) refers to first ladies after 1964 as 'political activists' and 'political interlopers', and suggests that the traditional demands (e.g., hosting and homemaking) placed on first ladies in the modern age no longer fit with their representation of the American woman, who is increasingly involved in politics. Like Burns, Beasley (2005, xviii) thoroughly analyzes each first lady's image and framing in the media, finding that their roles can vary from celebrity to political helpmate. In all cases they represent U.S. women and show the 'changing gender roles in American life.'

Wertheimer (2005, x-xiii, xviii) describes the office of first lady as critical to the presidency, but also depicts the troubles each first lady has had when communicating her story – be it ceremonial, in support of her husband, or advocating policy. No first lady 'received unanimous acclaim,' but most criticism seems to come to those who politically influence their husbands. Highlighting femininity is described as a safer way to profile oneself. The first lady both represents (female) U.S. society to the president, as well as bringing the Administration to the public. Borelli (2011) argues that any policy role is constituted in one of these representative roles, also highlighting the difficulties each first lady has in finding her voice without too much criticism.

Gutin (1989, 176) solidifies this research' use of the media as a source for the first lady's agenda, writing that 'the press plays a critical role in transmitting both the image and the substance of a [f]irst [l]ady.' She categorizes first ladies between 1920-1988 as 'White

Housekeepers' (ceremonial), 'Emerging Spokeswomen' or 'Political Surrogates and Independent Advocates' – the latter being more prevalent in later years. Truman (1995) describes first ladies in similar terms, suggesting that while first ladies may (increasingly) express themselves politically, their nonelected office may not be suited for a strong policy role.

In summary, previous works generally focus on the framing of the office of the first lady, not specifically on her involvement with problems and policy. If policies are cited, they are mentioned in the sense of the first lady being framed as a political activist, without detailing *what* she is advocating or what her policy profile looks like. Prior research also has not systematically examined media coverage for a longer time period. Likewise, the agenda-setting literature has so far not thoroughly analyzed the potential or manifest agenda-setting role of the first lady in American politics.

Parallel to this relatively 'policy blind' research on the U.S. first lady, studies of agenda setting have moved beyond single policy case studies and by now have resulted in impressive empirical mapping of public and political agendas in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. Building on Schattschneider (1960), Downs (1972), Cobb and Elder (1983), Kingdon (1984) and others, Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2005; 2015) have established a theoretical framework of punctuated equilibrium for analyzing how attention to policy problems develops over time and involves episodic shifts of a magnitude far beyond incremental change. A still expanding group of scholars has begun to show how political institutions deal with policy problems (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; Baumgartner et al. 2019). The Comparative Agendas Project as it has developed since its inception in the mid-2000s now comprises many examples of systematic long-term analysis of the agendas of political institutions, the media and public opinion.

To fill the knowledge gap concerning the level of attention paid to policy by the United States first ladies since 1945, this article follows the longitudinal empirical approach of the Comparative Agendas Project and employs a content analysis of articles in the *New York Times* using the CAP-topic codebook. Given the work done on the general profiles of the first ladies thus far, five hypotheses are presented, based on the findings of this existing work in order to assess whether the first ladies' policy agendas are substantive and developing. This article defines 'policy agendas' as the attention to policy problems, which may range from low key to high visibility, from a specific and single issue focus to a broader scope, and from some level of advocacy or an agenda shadowing the incumbent husband and his party to a profile that stands out as a distinct policy position.

This research explores the association between first ladies and policy issues using a content analysis to analyze articles printed in the *New York Times*. Earlier work using *NYT* data for analyzing policy agendas and issue evolution on the U.S. are e.g. the study of the death penalty by Baumgartner, De Boef and Boydstun (2011) and Adler and Wilkerson (2012) who look at the policy issues covered in the U.S. Congress, utilizing *NYT* editorials as a form of external support for a policy issue.

This research uses the *NYT* as a data source for tracking and mapping the attention to problems by the U.S. first lady over time, and not for investigating the media agenda *as such*, as was done by Boydstun (2013) in her thorough longitudinal study of the *NYT*'s own media agenda. Although other news sources such as the *Washington Post,* tabloids or websites also report on the U.S.' first ladies, these may be more biased towards either Washington affairs or

ceremonial matters, whereas *NYT* reports about a first lady's activities are more likely to be meaningful cues to the nation (Boydstun 2013, 84).[1]

FROM CELEBRITY TO ADVOCATE:
FIVE HYPOTHESES ON THE FIRST LADY'S POLICY AGENDA

As mentioned, existing inquiries into the first lady's roles suggest this position has become, or has been framed to be, more politicized over the years. This is seen to reflect their representation of the increasingly political identity of American women (Watson 2000; Wertheimer 2005; Burns 2008). Furthermore, in their recent work Baumgartner and Jones (2015) describe a gradual widening of the scope of government, the 'great issue expansion', between the 1960s and 1980s, until a turning point occurring during the Reagan administration and the policy scope started to narrow down. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1. The first lady is increasingly associated with policy issues.

This is measured quantitatively: there should be a positive relationship between the first ladies and the relative frequency with which they are associated with policy over time. Thus merely ceremonial and celebrity-related mentions of the first lady do not indicate attention to policy problems.

Second, it may be the case that the first lady concentrates or is seen to concentrate on 'softer' policy issues, or what Huddy and Terkildsen (1993, 120) term 'compassion' issues. Indeed, e.g. Watson (2000, 86-87) suggests advocating "social causes" is often part of a first lady's official duties. Thus, it may be the case that these more feminine compassion issues are prevalent in the NYT's coverage of first ladies. It might also be the case that these sorts of compassion issues become less dominant over time, with the rise of the feminist movement, and women increasingly caring about economic opportunity, energy costs, war and peace, etc. (Hirshman 2008):

H2: The first lady is decreasingly associated with compassion policy issues.

To measure this, the policy topics are categorized as 'harder' and 'compassion' issues as described by Huddy and Terkildsen. In effect, this results in three categories, as they do not categorize all policy categories (e.g., the environment or agriculture) in their work, so those are classified as neutral issues. Using Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993, 129, 141) typology, compassion issues are: women's issues, poverty, the elderly, childcare, abortion, education and healthcare. They describe hard issues as: things concerning the military or defense, economic policy, the budget deficit, business, loans, crime and the police. Prevalence of these compassion issues might indicate that the first lady is not as politicized, although these softer issues are also increasingly controversial and salient, so may still help her in staking her claim to being a policy actor.

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[1] Using the *NYT* as a source results in extra coverage about Clinton's political career post-first lady, since she ran for a New York constituency. This is slightly unrepresentative, but the hypotheses are tested only using observations while incumbent, further disregarding specific observations to do with her senatorial campaign.

Third, first ladies might choose specific issues around which they construct their political identity; e.g., Clinton seems to have been primarily associated with healthcare during her tenure (Burns 2009, 212). In this sense, first ladies have an agenda that can be diversified or concentrated, reflecting the degree to which they spread their attention amongst multiple issues or put one, or a few issues, in the spotlight. Throughout the years this may happen increasingly, as the first lady becomes a stronger political entity with a broader policy agenda. The abovementioned expansion of the scope of government may further allow for more varied policy topics:

H3: The first lady is increasingly associated with a diversified agenda.

For this hypothesis, the degree of diversification in each first lady's agenda is determined through an attention diversity analysis using Shannon's H (as suggested in Boydstun, Bevan and Thomas 2013). In testing this hypothesis, this article also considers whether there are particular policy issues that are predominantly associated with specific first ladies.

Fourth, there may be some relationship between the policy agendas of first ladies (as observed here through the NYT) and their husbands. It seems likely that the first ladies choose, or are designated, some specific policy topics that are distinct from their husbands'; this would also fit with the hypothesis that the first lady increasingly has her own policy agenda. Alternatively, it may be the case that first ladies support their husbands through referring to similar issues, in which case this hypothesis will be rejected – although this need not necessarily mean a more background position for the first lady, as this may also be indicative of the first lady being a political partner to the president. Either way, determining the relationship over time between the first lady and the president's policy agenda is worthwhile:

H4. The first lady is increasingly associated with policy issues separate from the presidential agenda.

Previous research within the Comparative Agendas Project has identified the agenda of presidents and their parties through State of the Union speeches. These data are compared and correlated with this article's original data to determine whether there are similarities or differences, and whether these change over time.

Since first ladies are connected to their husbands' Party (Borelli 2001, 412), the last hypothesis examines the first ladies' role in the partisan divide in the U.S. and the corresponding issue ownership (Egan 2013). For instance, Republican first ladies may be less involved with policy, representing the traditional Republican 'vision of U.S. womanhood' (Watson 2000, 130). If present, partisanship would indicate a strong form of political identity. However, any potential effects of partisanship could be mitigated by the lower prevalence of issue ownership in the United States (Sigelman and Buell 2004). Thus the fifth hypothesis is:

H5. A Republican first lady is associated with different policy issues than a Democratic first lady.

This should be observable through separating the first ladies between Republicans (6) and Democrats (6), comparing the relative frequency with which they are associated with policy

in general or with compassion issues specifically, whether their agenda is diversified, and whether they share the president's agenda – in other words, by looking at possible differences amongst the four previous hypotheses.

Drawing on these hypotheses and the abovementioned literature, a continuum of roles the first lady may take is constructed, as displayed in Figure 1. This continuum can guide this research, combining insights of agenda-setting research and from the first lady literature – strings of research that have barely touched each other in the past. The characteristics shown between policy participant and advocate are cumulative; each highlights relevant elements of advocacy contained in hypotheses 2-5.
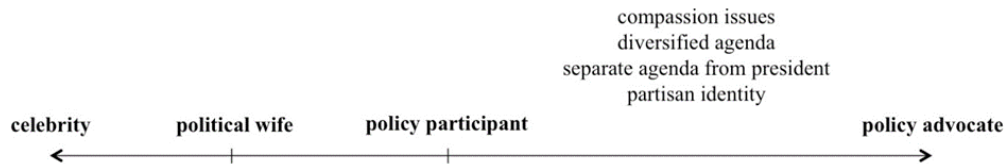

Figure 1. Continuum of First Lady Policy Profile.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

This project uses the topic classification scheme of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) to code all mentions of issues associated to the first lady in *NYT* articles. This approach results in an original dataset comparable to other data. The CAP codebook has been developed and utilized for comparative work on policy agendas in many countries, and also has been used to classify and code *NYT* articles (e.g., by Boydstun 2013). Specifically, this research uses the Policy Agendas codebook developed and used for U.S. policy; the codebook contains 21 categories, or major topics (shown in the legend of Figure 5), and 209 subtopics.[2] A possible criticism on the CAP is its lack of directional information – i.e., indicating whether one is in favor of or against a policy – yet, this information should not affect the agenda-setting role of the first lady, since this centers on issue consciousness and not the way she has framed issues. Additionally, most subtopics are specific enough to determine one's position regarding the policy, and the hand coding will provide insight for potentially unclear directions.

In most of its applications, the Policy Agendas codebook suggests coding the primary policy topic, since it actively analyzes a specific agenda and its institutional characteristics. In this project however the main interest is not in the *NYT* agenda *as such* (or as a measure of the media agenda), but to use the *NYT* as a data source for measuring the first lady's policy agenda. For this reason, every policy topic mentioned in relationship to the first lady in each article has been coded, resulting in multiple potential topics per article. The total number of observations thus was larger than the number of articles referencing the first lady: for the period 1945-2013 this research analyzed 4,841 articles and made 7,725 observations for measuring the first lady's policy agenda.

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[2] One small adjustment was made: the issue of abortion was given a separate coding category since it is a 'woman's issue' first ladies could potentially speak out on, while the CAP categorizes it as a 'right to privacy' issue.

A policy 'observation' also extends beyond direct policy-related statements: the first lady need not have her speech included in the *NYT* to become associated with an issue; her mere presence *associates* her with an issue, since she will receive many invitations and choose which events fit with her agenda. As Lady Bird Johnson noted: 'my role must emerge in deeds, not words' (*New York Times* 1963b). For instance, visiting a foster care home associates the first lady with the subtopic Family Issues (1208) or the major topic Law, Crime and Family Issues (12). However, such an 'association' can be risky: if issue proponents mention the first lady but she is not described as playing an active role regarding the policy topic (e.g., the *NYT* reports on a letter sent to Johnson about the war against poverty, but her position is not heard [Robertson 1964]), the association drawn may not actually be part of the first lady's agenda. A separate coding category was therefore created for 'passive' association with a policy topic. Furthermore, if an article does not just associate a first lady with a policy, but her husband the president as well, it will be coded as 'together with the president.'

It is possible that there is no specific policy topic mentioned, but just 'policy' in general. This also is coded separately, since it cannot be used for analysis of policy content but should be considered as association with policy overall. Dummies are also included for election campaigns, party affiliation (Democrat or Republican), and Hillary Clinton's political offices.

Since the literature suggests that first ladies are *increasingly* political, many articles in the created dataset do not contain references to policy issues. These non-policy related observations are also categorized. Seeing as much of the first lady's daily activities – insofar as they are covered by the *NYT* – consist of formal receptions or balls where fashions are described, this article differentiates between activities that are least political and activities that are skirting some line between non-political and political. For example, the latter type includes hosting receptions for members of Congress, State Dinners, and campaign rallies. The former category is coded as 'celebrity', while the latter category of articles is coded 'political wife' as presented in the continuum in Figure 1.

As for the coding material, the *NYT* source material is obtained through the ProQuest digital library for 1945-2011 (as the database ends in 2011); the material for 2012-January 2013 is obtained through the Factiva database. All articles (thereby foregoing obituaries, editorials, television guides, ads, etc.) generated from the database using the search term 'first lady' and each president's last name (since all women are known by their husbands' names) are included.[3] For the period of 12 April 1945 (Bess Truman's first day in office) until 20 January 2013 (the last day of Michelle Obama's first term), the ProQuest and Factiva library yields a volume of 5,766 articles, which were reduced to 4,841 after checking whether the first lady was actually mentioned (thus, 925 or 16 percent appeared 'junk' articles).

Since this project relies on hand-coded data, a Krippendorff α was obtained through a second independent coder, who used the coding system described above to code a random sample of the total volume of articles (120 articles, 10 per first lady, resulting in 146

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[3] Every relevant article should be included in that sample, since the women should be referred to as first lady for potential policy associations to matter to this research project. Similarly to presidents, newspapers generally refer to potential and former first ladies using their title; therefore, articles will also be categorized between mentioning incumbent or pre- and post-incumbent first ladies. This research primarily looks at the incumbent first ladies, though coding all observations of the first ladies in the sample ensures the dataset does not miss any relevant agenda-setting initiatives before or after the term of incumbency. After all, the office of the first lady is an institution, thereby (politically) legitimizing the women who held the office, in a way similar to former presidents acting in other social or political roles.

observations when separating for policy codes).[4] This α, suitable for small samples, can inform researchers about inter-coder reliability and validity of coded material (Krippendorff 2004). Since the α can only compare two columns directly, it was calculated for the coding of the CAP content: both coders' policy scores were compared, resulting in an α of .855, well above the suggested inter-coder reliability threshold of α > .8 (Krippendorff 2004, 241).

ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST LADY'S POLICY AGENDA 1945-2013

Out of the 4,841 articles mentioning at least one of the first ladies between Truman and Obama, 2,104 articles include a 'celebrity' observation for at least one first lady in the dataset (43%). Another 943 articles include a similar 'political wife' observation (19%). And 1,794 articles contain policy for at least one mentioned first lady (37%). Once each article's observations were extracted – separating them into one observation for each first lady contained (as one article can mention multiple first ladies) and for celebrity, political wife and policy associations – 7,225 observations were made. Of these, 2,704 fit in the category 'celebrity' (37%), 1,082 observations are coded as 'political wife' (15%), 35 observations as very general policy observations (0.5%), and 3,402 observations are identifiable topics using the CAP topic classification system (47%). Thus nearly half of the observations was located on the 'policy side' in the continuum from celebrity to advocate (Figure 1).

ASSOCIATION WITH POLICY ISSUES

The first hypothesis poses this research's main question: do first ladies become more political, and are they thus increasingly associated with policy? To address this hypothesis, all articles including one or more policy topics associated with the first lady were counted as one observation, as the question here is whether *any* policy was mentioned. When dealing with the other hypotheses further below each separate mention of a policy topic in an article was seen as an observation, as from that point, this article moves into the specific policy profiles of the first ladies. Data outside of the first lady's term in office are excluded since this research focuses on the office of the first lady. Similarly, observations on Hillary Clinton's (run for) other political offices also are excluded. All calculations are done using *R*. The division per first lady is given in Figure 2, since this is most relevant to determining the *increase* of first ladies being associated with policy.

This division in first lady roles also controls for the varying number of articles each first lady was mentioned in, i.e., how popular they were with the *NYT* reporters and the length of their tenure. There is quite some diversity in the absolute number of observations per incumbent first lady, ranging from Ford's 89 to Clinton's 830 observations (she is most prevalent in the *NYT*, even when excluding her Senate and post-incumbent observations).

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[4] Although coding more observations would be preferable, this was not possible within the limited resources for this project.
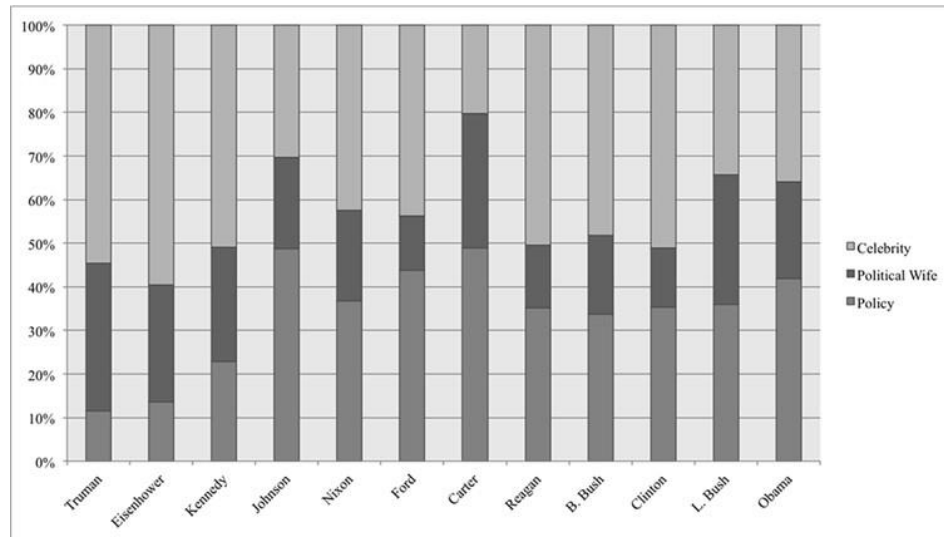
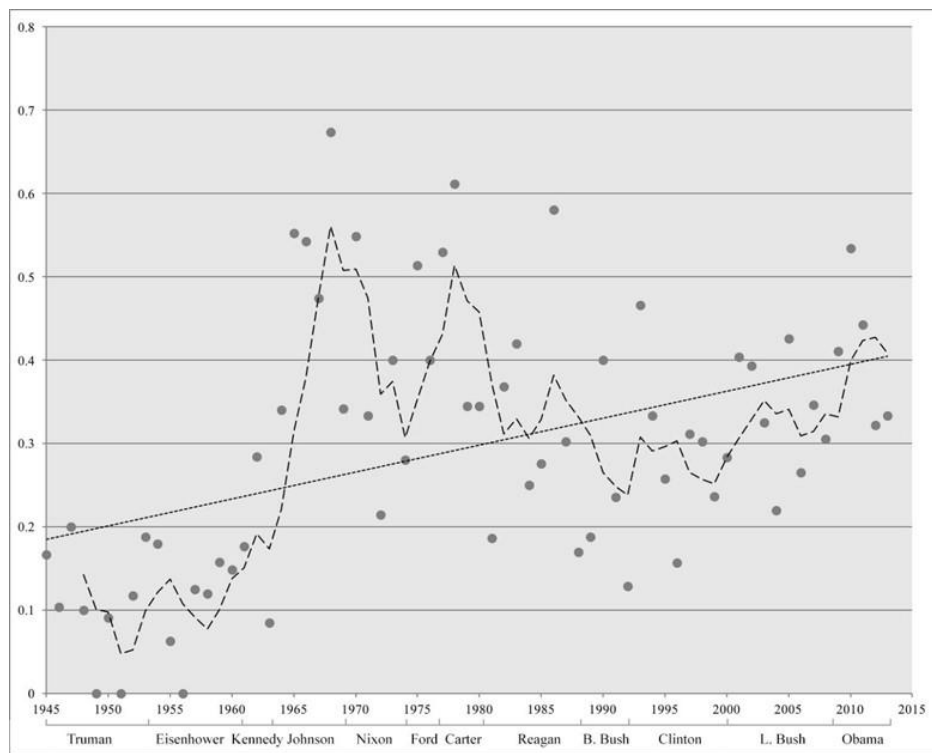Figure 2. Relative Division of (Policy) Observations per Incumbent First Lady.

Figure 3. Relationship between Yearly Share of Incumbent Policy Observations (Relative to the Total Amount of Observations) of the First Lady, with Trends of 4-year Moving Averages and Linear Regression.

In Figure 3, a significant increase of policy mentions over time can be seen with a coefficient of $B = 0.003$ ($SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.01$). The moving averages show cycles, varying over time, but the overall increase and trend solidifies the narrative of the first lady's political

emancipation: she follows the increase of the scope of government in the United States called the 'great issue expansion' by Baumgartner and Jones (2015). The first lady keeps speaking out on policy issues and does not let go of her policy agenda even after the political institutions in the United States began to show a decline in the scope of attention.

Even the least policy-oriented first lady had input on her husband's politics: Bess Truman edited all her husband's speeches to make sure they sound 'homey' (*New York Times* 1949). However, earlier policy observations should not be overestimated: these were generally charity-oriented, e.g. Eisenhower's association with war operations (subtopic 1619) was a clothing drive for Korea or as patroness for the Navy Relief Ball (*New York Times* 1953a, 1953b) – still policy-related, but not comparable to later first ladies. Johnson broke this trend by being strongly opinionated, the 'most politically minded woman to enter the White House as [f]irst [l]ady since Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt' (*New York Times* 1963a). This more politicized role was seen to be indicative of a changing role for women in society: 'Mrs. Carter said the fact that former First Ladies were organizing the event indicated that their roles had changed just as the role of women generally had changed in society. With Mrs. Johnson nodding in agreement, Mrs. Carter said, "There will never be another [f]irst [l]ady who goes to the White House to be a hostess"' (Smothers 1988).

Thus, policy advocacy seems to consolidate over time, both in times of a relative increase in policy associations (be it more cyclical than linear) as well as more stability in terms of that association per first lady's incumbency. This analysis provides evidence in favor of the first hypothesis: first ladies are increasingly associated with policy issues.

ASSOCIATION WITH COMPASSION ISSUES

Now that this article has established the first lady's increasing association with policy, the next step is to consider the second hypothesis which posits she is decreasingly associated with compassion issues such as health, education, childcare and women's issues. This hypothesis underscores the idea that first ladies represent emancipating American women who are political actors themselves.

In testing the hypotheses on the policy profile of the first ladies, data based on the CAP topic codebook are used, making separate observations for each time a topic is mentioned in an article on an incumbent first lady (all observations relating to Clinton's political offices are excluded). With all these active policy observations of incumbent first ladies separated by their compassion, neutral or hard category (as explained above), the dataset includes 1,078 compassion issue observations (64%); 424 neutral observations (25%); and 182 hard policy issue observations (11%). There are however differences between first ladies, as can be seen in Figure 4.

Johnson is associated with the fewest compassion issues and more with neutral policy topics; this is likely due to her focus on beautification of highways, which are respectively environmental and transportation issues. This highlights a potential weakness of the CAP division and Huddy and Terkildsen's dimensions, as planting flowers in parks and along roads could arguably be a compassion issue when framed as caring for the environment and/or conservation. For all other first ladies however, the majority of policy observations are of compassion issues. From the overall frequencies one can conclude that compassion issues make up a majority of the policy issues first ladies are associated with.
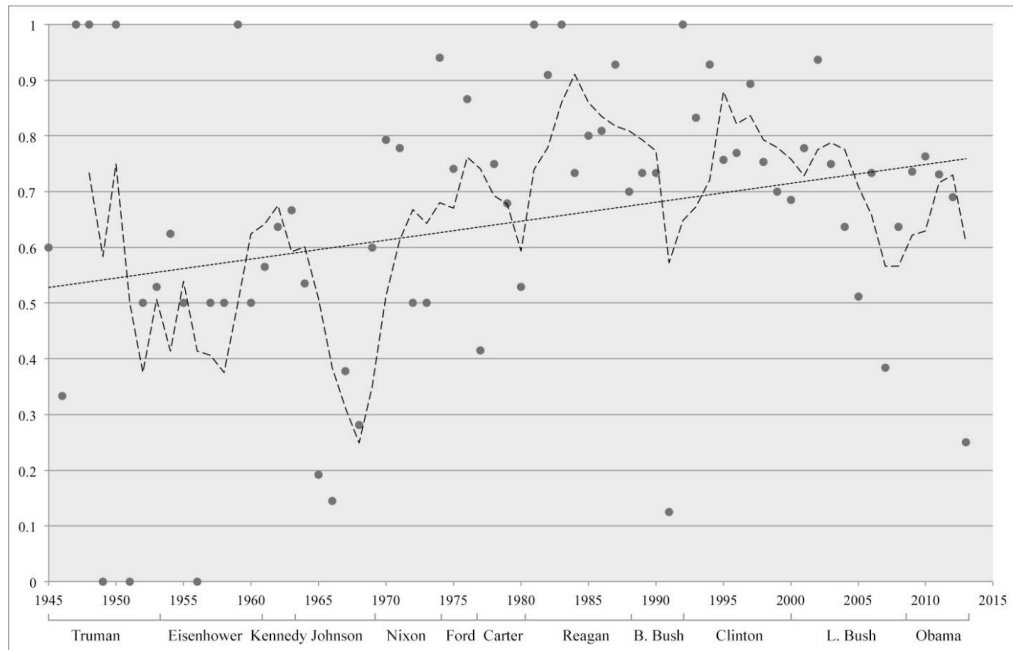
Figure 4. Relationship between First Lady Active Incumbent Policy Observations and the Relative Share of Compassion Topics, with Trends of 4-year Moving Averages and Linear Regression.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, Figure 4 also shows that compassion issues increase in their relative share of first ladies' attention. The trend line has a regression coefficient of $B = 0.003$ ($SE = 0.002$, $p < 0.05$), which although small, is a significant effect. There is however a rather dispersed set of observations (especially between the 1960s and 1980s) with quite some variation from year to year, as is also shown by the 4-year moving averages, with not all first ladies having a similar variation. Some of this, especially in the earlier years and in 2013, is likely to be due to the low number of observations for those years. Due to those lower amounts of observations, e.g. Barbara Bush deviates between 13 percent (1991) to 100 percent (1992) of her policy agenda consisting of compassion issues – while with more observations, Clinton's policy agenda is relatively steady between 93 percent (1993) and 69 percent (2000).

Generally, the feminist movement has seemingly not made an impact on the type of issues first ladies are associated with over time, even if the *NYT* (1987) reports stories such as: 'Mrs. Reagan has earned her influence, and she has a right to her opinions, even on issues once chauvinistically thought of as *men's concerns.*' While most first ladies identify with the women's movement, they themselves are primarily associated with compassion issues, and hypothesis 2 therefore must be rejected.

Nevertheless, while compassion issues are different issues, they also are political policy fields. It might be favorable for first ladies' political power: 'one of the helpful stereotypes about women in politics is that they are particularly good on issues like health care' (Toner 1993), suggesting they may affect policy more easily in these domains.

Furthermore, compassion issues – or any issues – must not be considered static nor constantly at one level of politicization. Health issues for example have become politically

salient also on the presidential agenda. Indeed, perhaps the political emancipation of the American women has led to the increasing importance of compassion issues, which in turn show that the first lady has in fact taken on controversial and politically challenging policy problems. As this article touches on further under hypothesis 4, Clinton's focus on health care was seen as 'co-governing' with the president and indubitably constitutes a (still more) salient political topic.

ASSOCIATION WITH A DIVERSIFIED AGENDA

Next, this article looks at the level of issue diversity on the first lady's agenda over time, with hypothesis 3 being that this issue diversity has increased. The reason for this expectation is that the first lady has evolved as a political institution with her own varied policy agenda. Figure 5 displays the relative frequencies of each major CAP topic. There are some issue domains where first ladies are more active than in others, but apart from Bess Truman (who had only 14 CAP policy observations) and Nancy Reagan, none of the separate policy domains make up more than 40 percent of the first lady's policy agenda. Insofar as the first lady's agenda contains issue focus, these potential spotlight areas never make up a majority of their agenda.

From that variation in policy domains follows a similar, generally even larger, variation between each policy topic (coded at the subtopic level in the CAP codebook). There is some focus: 36 percent of Truman's (few) observations concern volunteerism (1305); 35 percent of Kennedy's agenda is focused on the arts and humanities (609), Ford spends 31 percent of her incumbent policy agenda on mental illness (333); Reagan's agenda consists of a 42 percent focus on alcohol and drug abuse (342); and 27 percent of Obama's policy agenda puts nutrition and food assistance (1301) in the spotlight (which may be seen in conjunction with the 18 percent of her agenda spent on health promotion (331)). All other first ladies concentrate less than 25 percent of their agenda on one specific issue.

The *NYT*'s reporting suggests that first ladies (post-1960) choose specific issues to highlight, and there are quite some articles comparing these spotlight issues. Kennedy wanted to restore the White House's history for the benefit of the nation (*New York Times* 1961); Johnson's 'two favored projects … will be the beautification and antipoverty programs' (*NYT* 1965); Nixon hoped 'to be very active in the environment field' (*NYT* 1971); Ford fought for women's rights and the Equal Rights Amendment; Carter 'supported mental health' (Rosselini 1981); Reagan hoped to be remembered for her help to children's and drug abuse problems (Wines 1989); Barbara Bush campaigned against illiteracy (Weinraub 1989); Clinton attempted a healthcare overhaul (Seelye 1997); Laura Bush focused on 'literacy, education and health' (Meyers 2007); and Obama highlighted 'healthy living…, supporting working families and military spouses' (Swarns 2009).

While most of these suggested agenda concentrations are indeed reflected in the data, it is apparent that many first ladies (are invited to) speak out about many different policy topics so that the visibility of 'spotlight' issues on their agenda sometimes is weakened.

Already in 1978, the *NYT* writes that '[t]he [f]irst [l]ady customarily stakes out a noncontroversial cause, such as beautification, and gains the resulting publicity' (Tolchin). Indeed, all spotlighted issues are noncontroversial; they are valence issues, not disputed position issues (Stokes 1963). While almost all first ladies enjoyed a rather positive

approval rating[5] – generally better than their husbands – Reagan and Clinton's strong personalities seem to have made them less popular (Berke 1996), despite sticking to similar noncontroversial policy issues (as noted by Carter, Clinton's approval ratings skyrocketed again 'as soon as she stood by her man' instead of 'working on policy' [Bumiller 1999]).
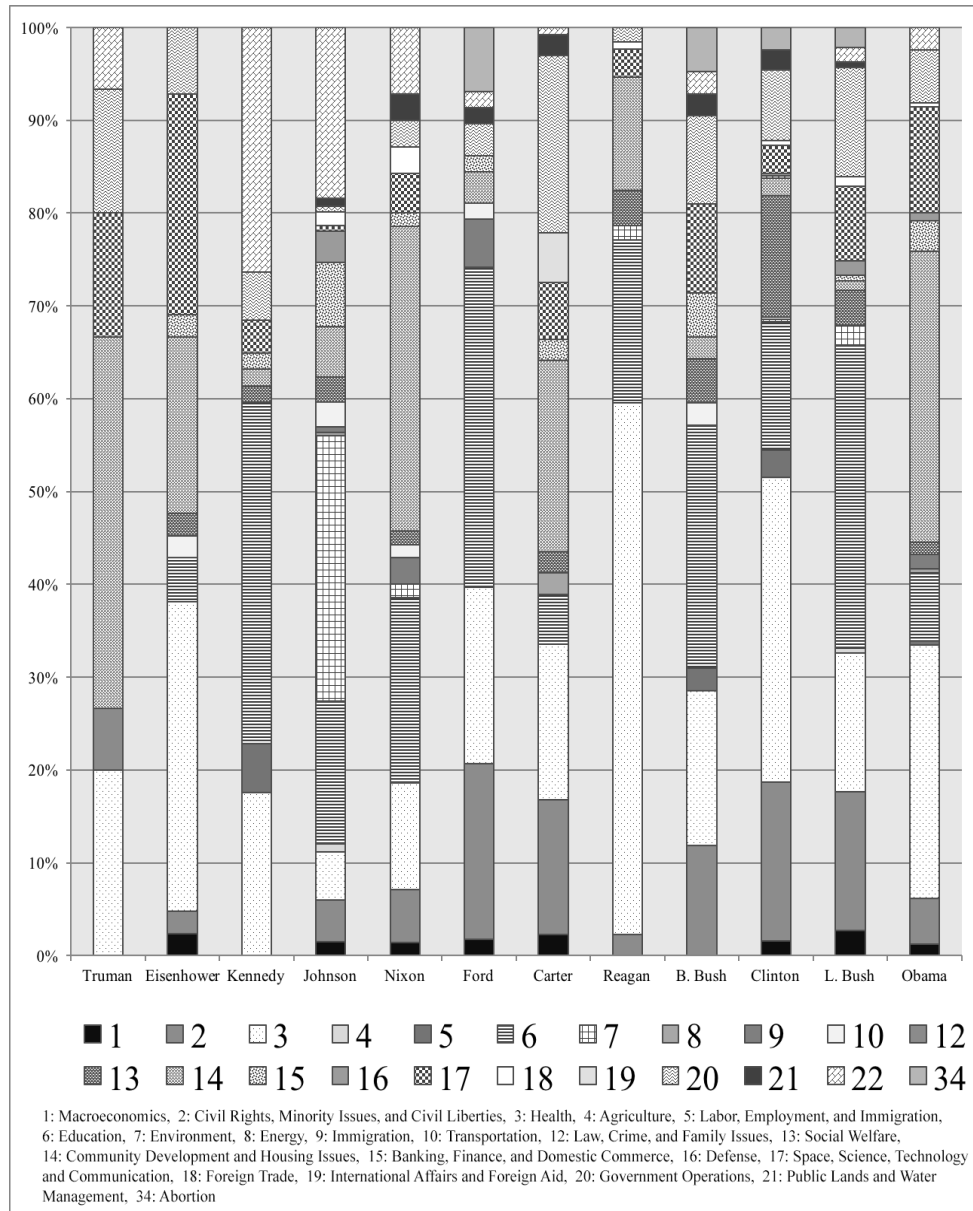

Figure 5. Relative Frequency of Policy Domains per First Lady.

Table 2. Agenda Diversification of the First Lady as Calculated Using Normalized Shannon's H, on a Major CAP Topic Level and on Subtopic Level (Higher Scores Indicate Greater Diversification)

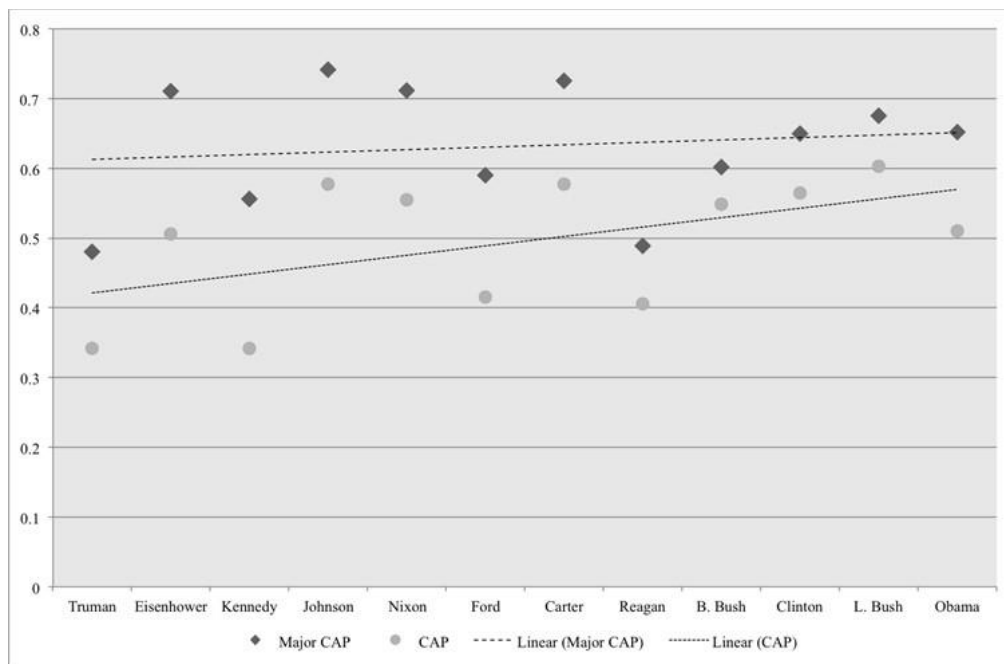| First Lady	Agenda Diversification	
	Major CAP Topic	CAP Topic
Truman	0.480	0.342
Eisenhower	0.711	0.506
Kennedy	0.556	0.342
Johnson	0.741	0.577
Nixon	0.712	0.555
Ford	0.590	0.415
Carter	0.726	0.577
Reagan	0.489	0.406
B. Bush	0.602	0.549
Clinton	0.650	0.565
L. Bush	0.675	0.603
Obama	0.652	0.510

Figure 6. Agenda Concentration of Each First Lady Expressed in Normalized Shannon's H Levels (Lower Scores Indicate Greater Concentration).

These observations illustrate this article's findings when determining entropy levels on the first ladies' policy agenda. Entropy is a measure of diversity, with the lowest level indicating full concentration on one policy topic. The entropy level is expressed in normalized Shannon's H in Table 2. Shannon's H calculates the level of concentration over all possible major or subtopics – not just those that a first lady has included in her agenda but all of the

categories distinguished in the CAP topic system – and the normalized Shannon's H allows comparisons of the scores per first lady.

There is a pattern of increased diversification after Kennedy, following the broadening scope of government between the 1960s and 1980s; and there is also Reagan's relatively low score indicating a higher level of concentration, fitting with her focus on alcohol and drug abuse. Figure 6 shows an increase in agenda diversity; on the major CAP topics level, the linear regression coefficient is $B = 0.003$ ($SE = 0.008$, $p = 0.663$) and on a subtopic level, the coefficient is $B = 0.013$ ($SE = 0.007$, $p = 0.087$); these trends however are non-significant.

Although it must be concluded that there is no statistical evidence for the third hypothesis that first ladies' agendas are increasingly diversified, there seem to be patterns over time, potentially cycles of issues attention, which can be further analyzed in future research.

RELATION TO THE PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA

Is the first lady's policy agenda similar to or separate from the president? Table 3 shows the percentages of policy associations that also involve the president. There seem to be large differences between the early first ladies – with Truman's 21 percent and Eisenhower's 2 percent – but in part this is due to small numbers of observations rather than any intentional differentiation in profiling. According to previous literature and as was visible in figure 2, Truman and Eisenhower were comparable portrayers of the supportive 'political wife' role.

Table 3 thus shows first ladies have many 'independent' policy associations, but this does not establish whether her agenda mirrors or deviates from her husband's. Datasets from the U.S. Policy Agendas project are used as comparison, as this dataset has identified CAP codes for State of the Union speeches.[6] For the purposes of this research, the president's agenda is best measured with the agenda as portrayed in the State of the Union as this is indicative of management of the executive branch, not just the policy and/or legislative agenda. Additionally, the State of the Union is a policy speech and thereby a similar venue to the *NYT* for the first lady's policy speeches or (unspoken) statements such as visits.

Overall, the correlation coefficient between the president and first lady's agendas is 0.122 on a major topic level, and 0.130 on a subtopic level for the State of the Union. These low coefficients show that overall, the first lady has a different agenda than the president, at least when measured through these observations. This may very well be on purpose; even in 1956 the *NYT* remarked that '[s]he has taken from the President's shoulders much of the load of making personal appearances and being photographed for worthy causes' (Furman 1956).

To determine the relationship over time, the relationship between each first lady and president's agenda were correlated and graphed in Figure 7 with linear estimations of each trend line. This shows no statistically significant evidence for a trend either way. When comparing the first lady's agenda to the president's as measured through the State of the Union, the linear regression coefficient is $B = 0.009$ ($SE = 0.019$, $p = 0.634$) for the major topics, and $B = 0.018$ ($SE = 0.011$, $p = 0.144$) for the subtopics. Thus, the data show no

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[6] Using data from the Policy Agendas project, some small adjustments were made to make them as comparable as possible; in the first ladies' dataset abortion is included as 208 (right to privacy), as suggested by the CAP instead of 3400. From the State of the Union dataset, the 0/-555 observations were removed (since the State of the Union is coded on sentence-level, and not all sentences contain policy content, many observations in that dataset are 'junk').

support for hypothesis 4: the first lady's policy agenda has not meaningfully become more or less similar to the president's policy agenda. Instead, this seems to vary per presidential couple.

**Table 3. Share of First Lady's Active Incumbent Policy Observations
also Involving the President**

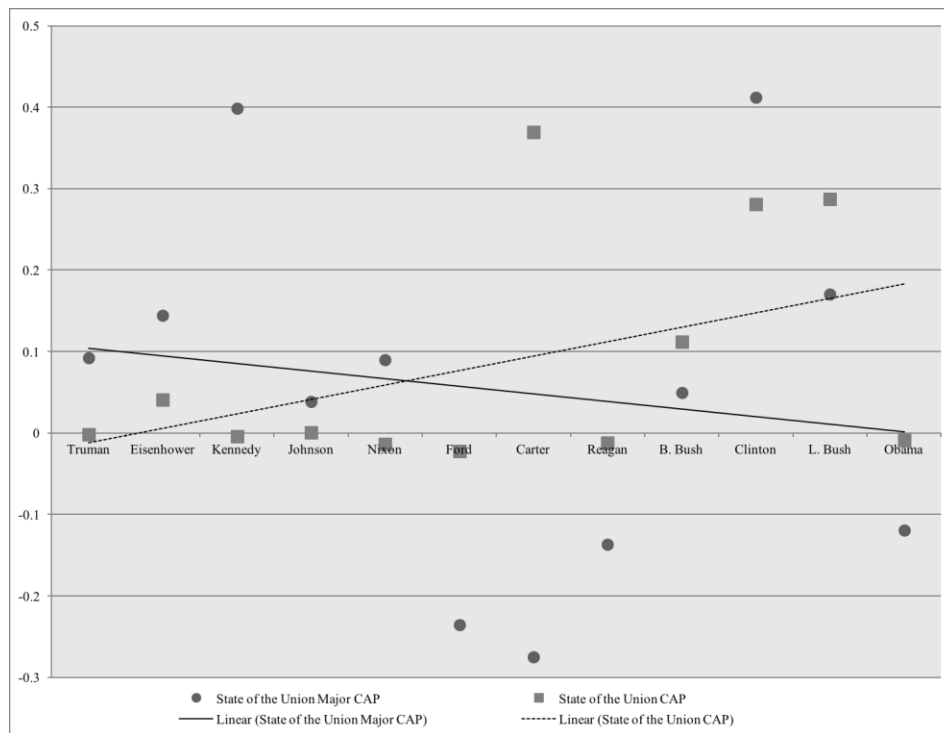| First Lady	Policy Observations Together with the President	
	Percentage	Observations
Truman	21%	3 out of 14
Eisenhower	2%	1 out of 43
Kennedy	14%	9 out of 63
Johnson	9%	30 out of 350
Nixon	6%	5 out of 81
Ford	5%	3 out of 62
Carter	13%	19 out of 142
Reagan	14%	25 out of 178
B. Bush	20%	15 out of 75
Clinton	25%	120 out of 483
L. Bush	11%	23 out of 201
Obama	14%	36 out of 262

Figure 7. Relationship Between the First Lady's Agenda, as Measured Through Active Incumbent Policy Observations, and Each Respective President's Agenda, as Measured Through State of the Union Speeches.

There are some other qualifications that can be made. Clinton has the most active incumbent observations together with her husband (25%), and she shares her agenda with her husband: even if he is not with her she (relatively) often still profiles herself on similar topics, perhaps revealing her political ambitions. The Clintons sharing such a substantive part of their policy agenda may be a sign of political empowerment, since Bill Clinton actively campaigned with the 'two for the price of one' slogan (Winfield 1997, 166).

The Carters had a similar relationship: Rosalynn Carter has the largest correlation coefficient on the subtopic level with the State of the Union. She called herself 'more political' than Jimmy Carter (Klemesrud 1979) and was described at the time of their election as 'the most influential [f]irst [l]ady since Eleanor Roosevelt' (Shannon 1976). She noted that instead of having her own agenda like Roosevelt, she would rather compliment her husband's (Drummond Ayres 1979).

By contrast, Bess Truman felt 'superfluous' when not considered concerning the dropping of the atomic bomb, and was originally against her husband becoming president (*New York Times* 1986); insofar as the earlier first ladies had their own agendas, they were less powerful political actors than the 'presidential partners' who share their husband's agendas. First ladies, writes Barringer (1992), need the support of the president and the West Wing because otherwise 'the bureaucracy treats it as "the ladies issue", and no one takes it seriously'.

Thus, the role each first lady takes seems to be particular to her alone, dependent on her personality and agenda choices. Potential combined effects of the hypotheses are worth further analysis and remain an avenue for future research.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS

The last hypothesis looks at potential differences in policy associations between Democrat and Republican first ladies. First, this article considers whether there is a difference in terms of the division of celebrity, political wife, and policy observations, relative to the total amount of Democratic/Republican observations. This division appears to be fairly equal, with incumbent Democrat first ladies associated with policy only 5 percent more than their Republican counterparts. This difference is larger when including post-incumbent observations (as Republicans are portrayed as celebrity or political wife 10 percent more often), which is a result of Hillary Clinton's political career. This contradicts the idea that 'Republican First Ladies… don't have to take an interest. Unless they want a book contract' (Gould 1977); Reagan, Barbara and Laura Bush followed through on political interests they had before becoming first lady.

Looking at compassion issues, Republican first ladies show a stronger association than Democrats (71% instead of 58% of total observations). However, Democrats are not much more associated with hard issues (this is 14% for both groups); instead, Democrats are associated more with neutral issues (28% instead of the Republican 15%), and this is mostly due to Johnson's focus on highway beautification (environment and transportation).

The level of agenda diversity also does not vary with party affiliation. Both Democrat and Republic first ladies' attention allocation move at an entropy level of around 0.630 for major topics, and around 0.500 when subtopics are analyzed. It seems that Nancy Reagan was a special case with her relatively strong concentration on one issue.
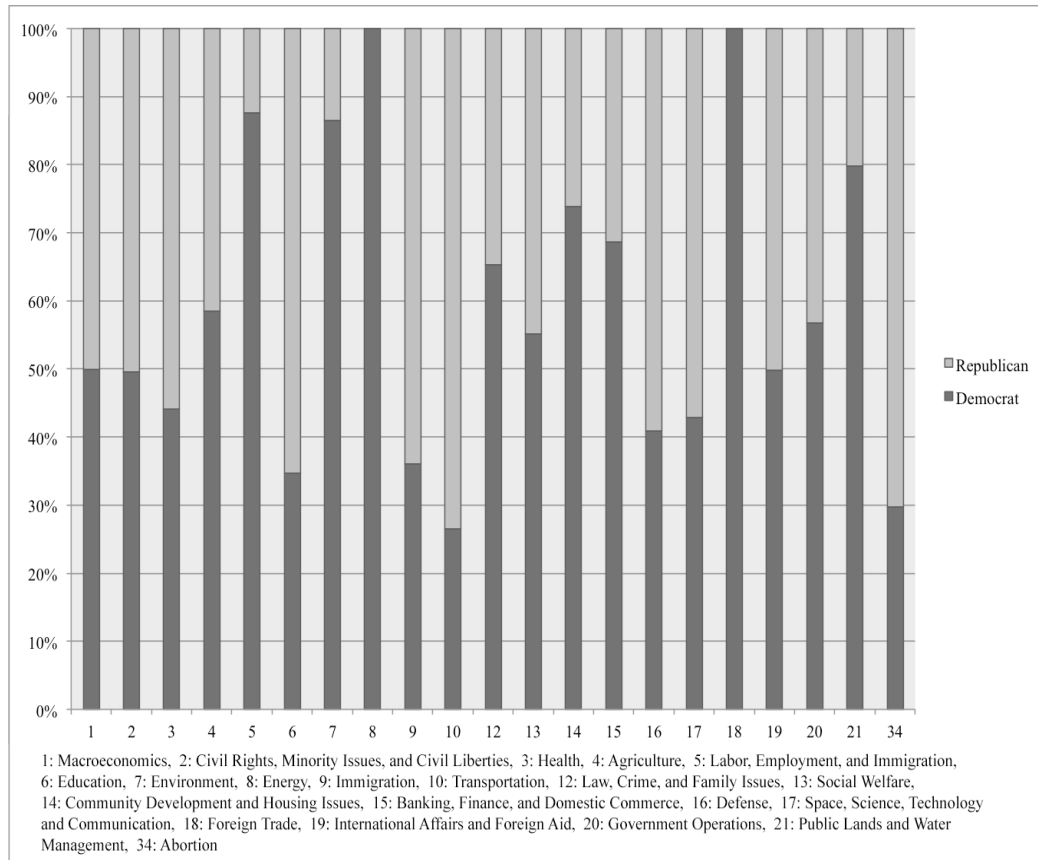
Figure 8. Division between Major Policy Topics Associated with Incumbent Democratic and Republican First Ladies.

Figure 8 depicts the relative associations per issue domain (dividing the total tally of Democrats associated with a major topic by the total tally of issues associated with Democrats). There are some issue areas that can be considered Republican (with 10% more associations with the topics), such as education (6) and abortion (34). Democrats 'claim' more policy domains, namely environment (7), crime and family issues (12), community and housing (14), and public lands and water management (21). Although energy (8), immigration (9), transport (10), banking, finance and domestic commerce (15) and foreign trade (18) also have Republican or Democratic associations in Figure 8, the dataset contains fewer than 25 observations for these domains (out of 1,687, or 1% of the observations).

Reflecting on issue ownership research by Egan (2013), these findings are quite surprising for the Republicans, as education is considered a Democratic issue, and abortion is a position issue that Republicans are generally against – not something one would expect a first lady to speak out on. In contrast, environment and public lands and water management are seen as Democratic issues, fitting with Democratic first ladies; CAP's typology of combining family issues (more Democratic) with crime (typically more Republican) might account for that issue domain being primarily associated with Democrats.

As for subtopics, healthcare reform (301), other environmental issues, namely beautific-ation (799), and nutrition and food assistance (1301) are Democratic issues (associated at

least 5% more, relatively speaking). By contrast, alcohol and illegal drug abuse (342) is the only issue that is overwhelmingly (by 10%) Republican. These are also spotlight issues for respectively Clinton, Johnson, Obama and Reagan. Thus, when looking at the subtopic level, it appears first ladies highlight issues that fit with their partisan affiliation, cementing their political identity in a partisan manner.

When comparing the president's agenda with the first lady's agenda overall, the following can be seen when comparing to the policy agenda expressed in the State of the Union: on major policy topics, the Democrats' correlation coefficient is -0.241; the Republicans' correlation coefficient is 0.182. On subtopics, the Democrats' correlation coefficient is 0.145; the Republicans have a correlation coefficient of 0.134. These are not clearly different. The Republican first ladies may seem to have a more different agenda from their presidents on major topics, but this pattern is tempered at the subtopic level.

Overall, then, it seems there are differences but they are not striking: clear partisanship is not observed. Unelected first ladies may need to be a first lady of the *nation*, not of their party. These results also may be due to the first lady's personality or the fact that she is a woman, representing 'womanhood' to the U.S. public (as suggested in Wertheimer 2005, xviii).

Contrary to their traditionally more passive approach to womanhood (as suggested by Watson 2000), *NYT* commentators suggest that Republicans used the Bush ladies politically: 'helping co-opt the issues of interest mostly to women' (Dowd 1990); Barbara Bush was the 'secret weapon' in the 1992 presidential elections (Stanley 1992). For example, on women's rights, which have been a Democratic issue since 1980 (Wolbrecht 2000), Republican first ladies are relatively quite active – perhaps the *NYT* does not write about Democratic first ladies' positions since their allegiance to women's issues is considered natural. The data show that Ford fought for women's rights, particularly the Equal Rights Amendment; Barbara and Laura Bush spoke up about their positions concerning abortion and feminism as well; and as described above, abortion is primarily associated with Republican first ladies.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed whether first ladies are increasingly associated with policy issues in the period 1945-2013. Many have argued that an unelected official should not be so influential: Jacqueline Kennedy herself hated her title because it was 'anti-democratic' (Honan 1994). Polls however have shown that while the electorate does not want a first lady to have direct political power, they still 'expect her to perform a great deal of unpaid labor' (Bennetts 1980).

Based on an original *New York Times* articles based dataset, this article found that the first lady indeed is increasingly associated with policy over time. While they may be associated with so-called 'compassion' issues, this link might show the emancipation of the female American electorate resulting in the politicization of these 'softer' policy problems: there is no reason to assume that the first lady's role in these policy issues was and is not political, salient or controversial. Furthermore, the dispersion in associations between the 1960s and 1980s (for each first lady's term in office) decreases, showing consolidation of this tendency to be increasingly associated with policy issues. These findings connect with recent

agenda-setting research indicating how the scope of the U.S. government expanded in the same period (Baumgartner and Jones 2015).

When first ladies are associated with policy, they are primarily associated with so-called compassion issues, but this does not decrease over time to fit with a feminist policy advocacy-narrative that women should rule the economy as much as they rule the home – although as stated above, this need not be an indication of lessened political power.
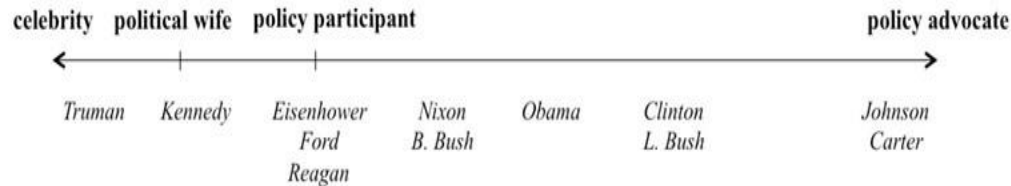

Figure 9. Continuum of Incumbent First Lady Policy Profiles Post-1945.

The first lady also does not seem to have an increasingly diversified agenda; rather than fixing a spotlight on a limited amount of issues, she lights up quite a bit of the room, with only Reagan having a clear 'pet' concern with drug and alcohol abuse. There seem to be cycles of diversification (and differences per first lady), not a clear linear increase.

Additionally, there appears to be no real correlation between the president and first lady's agenda overall, indicating they focus on different issues. In fact, two first ladies with higher correlations to the president's agenda as expressed in his State of the Union speeches, Carter and Clinton, were strong presidential partners rather than simply parroting their husband's agenda.

Last, no clear partisan divisions were found, although a few of the spotlighted issues that first ladies have chosen may have been selected because they fit with their party identity. This was to be expected, since it is an extreme manifestation of the 'policy' role. Some Republican first ladies associate themselves with non-traditional Republican issues such as women's rights or abortion, which may be due to them identifying more as first *lady* than first *Republican* lady.

In general, every first lady maintains her own (policy) identity, often reflecting the Zeitgeist, as suggested in earlier literature; instead of linear trends, cycles appear more prevalent.

These analyses allow this research to locate first ladies on the continuum from Figure 1, between celebrity and policy advocate. Our longitudinal research has shown that every first lady seems to have created her own policy agenda. The index shown in Figure 9 has been created by allocating points (0-2) for each hypothesis, with high values representing the strongest policy association, lowest compassion share, highest agenda diversification, least sharing of the president's agenda, and most partisan observations. On the left are first ladies such as Truman, who did not become involved in policy; on the right are Johnson and Carter, who spent much of their time in the press building their policy agenda. Other first ladies fall in between these categories, with many of their positions nevertheless showing distinct and meaningful policy identities as mentioned above.

Future research can use this dataset for further analysis concerning the (policy) role of the first lady, its potential cycles and interaction effects between the variables, thereby testing the existing conventions of her office. For one, these data could be compared to other

observations of the policy agenda in the United States. The research may also be expanded by analyzing the first lady's agenda through other data sources than the *NYT*.

The CAP data mostly still lack directional information, and it would be useful to study the tone with which first ladies discuss certain policy issues; as Republican first ladies were shown to be relatively likely to discuss abortion and women's issues, future work could compare their tone to their husbands'. This is also relevant because the finding in this analysis about the overall prevalence of compassion issues over time may hide that these issues themselves have changed in nature: becoming more politically salient or even controversial, as for example health care.

Furthermore, a division could be made between direct involvement with policymaking versus pure advocacy roles: when Clinton attempted to overhaul the healthcare system, '[s]he realized she overstepped' (Purdum 1995) and receded to the more passive policy 'advocate.' These points of future research attention can provide more clarity on where to place the first ladies on the continuum, and advance existent longitudinal agenda-setting research, like the CAP, regarding the activities of unelected officials.

Future research also may help identify how the office continues to change, for instance when it sees its first First Lad. After all, while denying that she would ever run for president, Hillary Clinton said in 1997: 'I do think we will have a serious candidate in 20 years…' (Wadler 1997). And in fact, she was such a candidate herself – she however did not win the presidency in 2016. On the other hand, even if there is a trend visible in our findings over the entire period since 1945, every first lady designs her own (non-) policy identity, as we have seen in the years of Melania Trump. With Jill Biden, who follows in the footsteps of Bess Truman, Lady Bird Johnson, Pat Nixon, Betty Ford and Barbara Bush with her track record as both second and first lady, it is likely that another shift will occur on the profile continuum, away from celebrity towards a more substantive policy orientation.

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