



## Presidential spouses play important role in American politics

# The First Ladies

By KELLY BRONK

One of the highest-profile jobs in U.S. government comes with no official duties, no paycheck and is awarded based on family connections. But first lady of the United States is a job with almost limitless possibilities.

Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, wrote a daily newspaper column and hosted a weekly radio program during her husband's term. Claudia (Lady Bird) Johnson, wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson, promoted environmental conservation. Current first lady Laura Bush has championed women's rights and promoted reading programs.

Hillary Clinton's experience in the White House gave her valuable name recognition that helped her win a seat in the U.S. Senate and become the first presidential spouse to run for president.

Each brought her personal style and passions to a post Patricia Nixon, wife of President Richard Nixon, described in a 1972 news conference as "the hardest unpaid job in the world."

In the United States, the role of first lady is an unelected, unpaid position without constitutional responsibilities. But the first lady, who acts as White House hostess, is also highly influential.

American first ladies are political celebrities, according to Myra Gutin, a first lady historian and professor of communications at Rider University in New Jersey. "If they go somewhere, if they advocate an idea, if they use the White House podium and say, 'I care about this,' it's something that gets a lot of attention," Gutin says. "Other first ladies around the world are not treated in the same manner."

### First ladies in waiting

In the United States, a presidential candidate's wife commands attention on the campaign trail, something Cindy McCain, wife of Republican presidential nominee John McCain, and Michelle Obama, wife of Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee, understand well.

A spouse is one of many factors Americans consider when deciding which candidate deserves their votes. "Candidates' wives open a window into the role that the men play in their families and provide a reflection of their husbands' character," says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies' Library in Ohio, and author of books on presidential families.

*Above left: Former first ladies (from left) Claudia (Lady Bird) Johnson, Patricia Nixon, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush (standing), Rosalynn Carter and Betty Ford at the dedication of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in 1991.*

*Above: Incoming first lady Laura Bush (left) with Hillary Clinton at the White House in 2000.*

Besides attesting to their husbands' character, the wives provide support and guidance to their husbands. "History has shown that they provide wise, intuitive and often bluntly honest advice to their husbands," Anthony says. The campaigns offer voters a glimpse of what kind of first lady a candidate's wife might be.

### Michelle Obama

According to Gutin, Obama would be an activist first lady, someone likely to be involved in policy decisions. "She certainly seems to be someone who would take advantage of the podium the White House affords her," Gutin says. "She is bright, she is articulate, and she has professional experiences in management."

Obama, 44, is a Chicago native who received her undergraduate degree in sociology from Princeton University in New Jersey, and later earned a law degree from Harvard University in Massachusetts. After graduation, she worked at a Chicago law firm where she met Barack Obama. They married in 1992.

Since leaving corporate law to pursue a career in public service, Obama has held several positions in the Chicago government, and helped found Public Allies Chicago, an organization that encourages young people to choose careers in the public sector.

Most recently, Obama served as vice president of community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center in Illinois. "Michelle Obama's position as a hospital administrator has given her experience in the practicalities and realities of delivering health care in the United States," says Anthony.

### Cindy McCain

McCain also has experience that would help her in the role of first lady, Gutin says, but predicts she would be less of an activist than Obama. "She certainly has the credentials, but I don't see her getting involved in public policy," Gutin says.

Instead, McCain, 54, probably would

#### For more information:

National First Ladies' Library, Ohio

<http://www.firstladies.org/index.htm>

First Ladies Gallery

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/>



Cindy McCain

DEAN COX © AP/WWP



Michelle Obama

MORRY GASH © AP/WWP



CHITOSE SUZUKI © AP/WWP



BRENNAN LINSLEY © AP/WWP

Above: Cindy McCain with a baby at Da Khoa Tinh Khanh Hoa General Hospital in Vietnam.

Above right: Michelle Obama with a young patient at San Jorge Children's Hospital, in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

devote her attention to humanitarian work, perhaps as an advocate for children's health care issues. "Cindy McCain has experience working with international charities and going to many areas of the world that are considerably less advantaged than the United States, which gives her a unique perception of the reality of life around the world," Anthony says.

McCain attended the University of Southern California, where she earned an undergraduate degree in education and a master's degree in special education. After graduation, she taught disabled children in her home state of Arizona. She met John McCain while vacationing in Hawaii and they married in 1980.

In 1988, McCain founded the American Voluntary Medical Team, a nonprofit organization that coordinates humanitarian aid trips for medical professionals. She has also worked with international nongovernmental organizations including HALO, Operation Smile and CARE. She chairs the board of Hensley & Company, a family beer-distribution business.

No matter who assumes the role of first lady, it is likely the president's wife will continue to perform an essential function: Providing a voice of moderation for her husband.

"She is the one person that can turn to the president and say, 'You're full of baloney and be quiet,'" Gutin says. "In a place like the White House, it's very valuable to have a voice of reason and one that is not connected to a particular political point of view."



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