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## Siena College First Ladies Poll

### **Eleanor Roosevelt America's Top First Lady for 6<sup>th</sup> Consecutive Time**

*Abigail Adams Finishes a Close Second; Michelle Obama Moves to Third*

**First Lady Initiatives – Lady Bird Johnson (Environmental Protection) Did Most to Raise Awareness and Address the Issue; Obama (Childhood Obesity), Betty Ford (Women's Rights), and Barbara Bush (Literacy) Made Major Contributions Jackie Kennedy - 4<sup>th</sup> but First on Being a White House Steward & Public Image**

**Loudonville, NY** – For the sixth consecutive time, Eleanor Roosevelt receives the top spot in the Siena College Expert Survey of American First Ladies released today by the Siena College Research Institute (SCRI). Historians and scholars once again see Eleanor Roosevelt best exemplifying the ten characteristics of a First Lady. Abigail Adams edges closer and finishes second for the fourth consecutive time while Michelle Obama scored the largest gain of any First Lady and moved ahead of Jacqueline Kennedy into the third spot. Dolley Madison drops into fifth position while Betty Ford, Lady Bird Johnson, Hillary Clinton, Rosalynn Carter, and Martha Washington round out the top ten.

Asked to assess the work done by First Ladies from Lady Bird Johnson to Melania Trump on their selected social problem, Lady Bird Johnson gets the top rating both for raising awareness about environmental protection as well as for actually addressing the issue. Michelle Obama's commitment to combatting childhood obesity puts her in second place both in terms of raising awareness and addressing the problem. Betty Ford's work on women's rights is lauded for the contribution she made and Barbara Bush's focus on literacy ranks her fourth out of the ten 'modern' First Ladies on successfully addressing their chosen cause. While Hillary Clinton is credited with raising awareness on healthcare, she is ranked 8<sup>th</sup> among the First Ladies on successfully addressing her issue.

Jackie Kennedy finishes fourth overall, down one spot, but Kennedy is highest rated in two categories – being a steward of the White House and having the best public image. Additionally in questions asked only about 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century First Ladies, Jackie Kennedy finishes second to Eleanor Roosevelt for leaving a lasting legacy.

“While there is no written job description for First Lady, the country looks to the First Lady as both a ceremonial figure, almost royalty and as advisor, supporter and protector of the President. Jackie Kennedy, finishing tops in stewarding the White House and public image seems to cement her high ranking and lasting legacy more as the ceremonial First Lady,” according Don Levy, SCRI's Director. “Eleanor Roosevelt not only is the perennial winner topping categories including accomplishments and courage but also among the modern First Ladies is seen as the best political asset adequately fulfilling the ceremonial duties but outpacing all other First Ladies in her value to the president and the country.”

“Michelle Obama moved up two spots from fifth to third as her score on the ten categories increased by more than any other First Lady. Obama also ranks highest among modern First Ladies on managing her family while in office and finishes second to Eleanor Roosevelt as a political asset and as a communicator and Obama finishes just behind Hillary Clinton on ‘could be President,’” Levy said.

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The survey, conducted six times since 1982, asks historians, political scientists and published scholars to rank each First Lady, on a scale of one to five – five being outstanding and one being poor – in 10 categories.

- **Background**
- **Value to the country**
- **Being the White House Steward**
- **Courage**
- **Accomplishments**
- **Integrity**
- **Leadership**
- **Being her own woman**
- **Public image**
- **Value to the President**

<b>Siena College Research Institute’s First Ladies Survey</b>						
<i>The Top Ten...</i>						
<b>Rank</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>Eleanor Roosevelt</b>					
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Abigail Adams	Hillary Clinton	Abigail Adams	Abigail Adams	Abigail Adams	Abigail Adams
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Lady Bird Johnson	Abigail Adams	Dolley Madison	Jacqueline Kennedy	Jacqueline Kennedy	Michelle Obama
4 <sup>th</sup>	Dolley Madison	Dolley Madison	Jacqueline Kennedy	Hillary Clinton	Dolley Madison	Jacqueline Kennedy
5 <sup>th</sup>	Rosalynn Carter	Rosalynn Carter	Hillary Clinton	Lady Bird Johnson	Michelle Obama	Dolley Madison
6 <sup>th</sup>	Betty Ford	Lady Bird Johnson	Rosalynn Carter	Dolley Madison	Hillary Clinton	Betty Ford
7 <sup>th</sup>	Edith Wilson	Jacqueline Kennedy	Lady Bird Johnson	Betty Ford	Lady Bird Johnson	Lady Bird Johnson
8 <sup>th</sup>	Jacqueline Kennedy	Barbara Bush	Betty Ford	Rosalynn Carter	Betty Ford	Hillary Clinton
9 <sup>th</sup>	Martha Washington	Betty Ford	Edith Roosevelt	Martha Washington	Martha Washington	Rosalynn Carter
10 <sup>th</sup>	Edith Roosevelt	Edith Wilson	Sarah Polk	Edith Wilson	Rosalynn Carter	Martha Washington

“Finishing just outside the top ten are Barbara Bush, Edith Wilson, Edith Roosevelt, Laura Bush and Nancy Reagan,” notes Levy. “Barbara Bush’s overall score increased more since 2014 than any other First Lady except Obama and Carter, and she now is knocking on the door of the top ten while Laura Bush saw her ranking improve by two spots. History appears to be improving its view of the two Bush First Ladies.”

“In any ranking, someone has to bring up the rear. Lesser known First Ladies whose husbands’ presidencies were marred by scandal or lack of accomplishments including Florence Harding, Eliza Johnson, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, and Jane Pierce have occupied the bottom five,” Levy said. “This year, similar to Nancy Reagan’s low ranking in 1982 and 1993, Melania Trump enters the rankings in the 40<sup>th</sup> spot. We’re going to have to wait on history’s evaluation but for now it looks like these historians may have assessed Melania Trump’s contribution in part based on their view of her husband.”

<b>The Final Five...</b>					
<b>1982</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2020</b>
38 <sup>th</sup> : Jane Pierce	33 <sup>rd</sup> Margaret Taylor	34 <sup>th</sup> Letitia Tyler	34 <sup>th</sup> Margaret Taylor	35 <sup>th</sup> Margaret Taylor	36 <sup>th</sup> Eliza Johnson
39 <sup>th</sup> : Nancy Reagan	34 <sup>th</sup> : Jane Pierce	35 <sup>th</sup> Margaret Taylor	35 <sup>th</sup> Letitia Tyler	36 <sup>th</sup> Florence Harding	37 <sup>th</sup> Letitia Tyler
40 <sup>th</sup> : Ida McKinley	35 <sup>th</sup> : Florence Harding	36 <sup>th</sup> Mary Lincoln	36 <sup>th</sup> Mary Lincoln	37 <sup>th</sup> Letitia Tyler	38 <sup>th</sup> Margaret Taylor
41 <sup>st</sup> : Florence Harding	36 <sup>th</sup> : Nancy Reagan	37 <sup>th</sup> Florence Harding	37 <sup>th</sup> Florence Harding	38 <sup>th</sup> Eliza Johnson	39 <sup>th</sup> Jane Pierce
42 <sup>nd</sup> Mary Lincoln	37 <sup>th</sup> : Mary Lincoln	38 <sup>th</sup> Jane Pierce	38 <sup>th</sup> Jane Pierce	39 <sup>th</sup> Jane Pierce	40 <sup>th</sup> Melania Trump

“Mary Lincoln initially entered the rankings in last place and now as more has been written about her, she has moved up to 29<sup>th</sup> place well outside of the bottom five. Nancy Reagan, harshly judged by historians while in the White House and immediately after has seemingly settled into 15<sup>th</sup> place and is especially highly regarded for her value to the President. As Melania Trump moves on to being a former First Lady, we’ll see how historians view her role over time.”

<b>Top Choice Among 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century First Ladies*</b>							
<b>Managed Family Life</b>	<b>Advanced Women's Issues</b>	<b>Greatest Political Asset</b>	<b>Strongest Public Communicator</b>	<b>Could Have Done More</b>	<b>Imagine Serving as President</b>	<b>Performed Greatest Service After Leaving Office</b>	<b>Created Lasting Legacy</b>
Michelle Obama (59)	Eleanor Roosevelt (53)	Eleanor Roosevelt (63)	Eleanor Roosevelt (61)	Melania Trump (34)	Hillary Clinton (50)	Eleanor Roosevelt (61)	Eleanor Roosevelt (76)
Edith Roosevelt (21)	Hillary Clinton (38)	Michelle Obama (27)	Michelle Obama (44)	Laura Bush (23)	Michelle Obama (38)	Hillary Clinton (33)	Jacqueline Kennedy (15)
Jacqueline Kennedy (16)	Michelle Obama (18)	Hillary Clinton (16)	Hillary Clinton (10)	Bess Truman (15)	Eleanor Roosevelt (35)	Rosalynn Carter (17)	Michelle Obama (13)
Laura Bush (12)	Betty Ford (18)	Jacqueline Kennedy (9)	Jacqueline Kennedy (7)	Pat Nixon (10)	Edith Wilson (3)	Betty Ford (10)	Hillary Clinton (10)
Rosalynn Carter (6)	Edith Roosevelt (3)	Nancy Reagan (7)	Lady Bird Johnson (4)	Mamie Eisenhower (8)		Michelle Obama (4)	Lady Bird Johnson (9)

\* Numbers in parenthesis indicate score. A score of 100 would indicate that 100% of scholars named that First Lady as their top choice.

“Since the 1960’s every First Lady has focused part of her tenure on raising awareness of and promoting efforts to address a pressing social problem,” Levy added. “According to historians, each has succeeded doing more to raise awareness than in solving these pressing and obdurate issues, although Lady Bird’s campaign to address environmental protection and civic beautification and Michelle Obama’s work to combat childhood obesity were seen as more effective.”

<b>21<sup>st</sup> Century First Ladies Initiatives Ranking: Addressing the Issue</b>	
<b>Rank</b>	
1 <sup>st</sup>	Lady Bird Johnson: Environmental Protection and Beautification
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Michelle Obama: "Let's Move!"; Reducing Childhood Obesity
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Betty Ford: Women's Rights
4 <sup>th</sup>	Barbara Bush: Childhood Literacy
5 <sup>th</sup>	Laura Bush: "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn"; Childhood Literacy
6 <sup>th</sup>	Rosalynn Carter: Mental Health
7 <sup>th</sup>	Pat Nixon: Volunteerism
8 <sup>th</sup>	Hillary Clinton: Healthcare
9 <sup>th</sup>	Nancy Reagan: "Just Say No"; Drug Awareness
10 <sup>th</sup>	Melania Trump: "Be Best"; Cyberbullying Awareness

**This Siena College Research Institute survey of historians, political scientists and published scholars was conducted from February 12 – June 23, 2019 via online interviews with 209 experts.**

**For more information about the survey, including background, variations and interpretations of the rankings, charts and other data see the SCRI website at [www.siena.edu/scri/firstladies](http://www.siena.edu/scri/firstladies).**

**For comment, please contact Dr. Don Levy, SCRI Director at 518-944-0482 or [dlevy@siena.edu](mailto:dlevy@siena.edu) .**

**Appendices ( [www.siena.edu/scri/firstladies](http://www.siena.edu/scri/firstladies) )**

A: Overall Survey Results 2020

B: Relative rankings of 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Century First Ladies on select questions

C: Previous rankings in 1982, 1992, 2003, 2008, 2014