

Michelle Obama's poll numbers slide  
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By Nia-Malika Henderson, Politico

When Michelle Obama moved into the White House, she instantly became one of the most famous first ladies in history, a symbol of racial pride, a victor in the battle of the sexes and the picture of a modern woman, mother and wife.

But from her days on the campaign trail to her residency in the White House, Obama's favorability rating has been in flux, from a low of 48 percent in June 2008 to a peak of 72 percent last March to a slide to 61 percent in a recent Gallup Poll.

That 11-point stumble -- some might call it a tumble -- seems at odds with the focus of a White House publicity team that is carefully crafting her image and building a decidedly current, wholesome, upbeat brand. But while Obama has broadened the reach of her office, White House observers say that the role and projects she has embraced so far are seen by some as disappointingly traditional.

"If you asked most people, they would say she defines her job as first lady as taking care of her family, and maybe that's what the White House wants -- what she wants," said first lady historian Betty Boyd Caroli. "A lot of people appreciate that, but some people wanted more, and maybe that's why the numbers are dipping."

Like her husband, Obama moved into the White House with outsize expectations from different and sometimes competing constituencies: fashionistas, black women, working women, working mothers, stay-at-home mothers, feminists, post-feminists -- all identify with her.

"There was so much pressure on her as the first African-American first lady to be out there and performing in the public eye, and she did get a nice start, visiting the agencies, planting the garden and letting people see this side of her," said Anita McBride, chief of staff to Laura Bush, whose job approval ratings once stood at 85 percent -- the best ever recorded for a first lady.

"But I think she worries about making a misstep, about criticism, and I think that could contribute very much to taking a lower profile, and some of the popularity going down," as it did in the Gallup Poll two weeks ago, McBride said. "I think she started out in an impossible situation because there was so much pressure on her to be doing everything."

Caroli also said that Obama's campaign-style foray into Chicago's failed Olympics bid in Copenhagen also might have put a dent in her popularity.

East Wing aides say that Obama's approach to her role fits with her interests and passions. They point to her open-door policy at the White House, where she has hosted hundreds of local schoolchildren, and her visits to dozens of schools and community centers. Instead of one signature issue, they say, she's chosen several, with the White House garden serving as a kind of symbol for her many passions --community service, fitness, healthy eating, work-life balance, mentoring, good mothering.

"My message to women: Do what makes you feel good because there'll always be someone who thinks you should do it differently," she said in a recent interview with Prevention Magazine.

She kicked off a year-long mentoring program last week and will take up health care and seniors on Friday; aides said she will turn her attention to childhood obesity this winter and will continue to focus on the importance of mentoring young girls, using her own life story as a way to encourage change..

White House historians point to a fundamental difference in how Americans view the wives of Republican and Democratic presidents. Laura Bush, for instance, kept very high approval ratings, even as her husband's tanked, because she maintained a separate identity and was viewed as a traditional first lady who didn't meddle in Oval Office affairs. McBride said her staff didn't conduct polls but instead looked at issues of the day to see where the first lady could make a difference without running into trouble.

But with Democratic first ladies dating back to Eleanor Roosevelt, historians said, there is an expectation that the president and first lady are a package deal - - a bargain enthusiastically embraced by the Clintons, who overtly campaigned as a twofer.

Despite Michelle Obama's highly successful professional career, the Obamas eschewed the image of being a two-for-one package, even though Michelle Obama was seen as full partner in developing her husband's political image and policy initiatives.

"We did not think that Laura Bush was as politically tied into her husband's administration as we assume Michelle Obama is tied into her husband's agenda and administration," said Stacey Cordery, a bibliographer for the National First Ladies' Library. "We see her as someone who is going on date nights and

talking about politics, walking the dog and talking about politics and going on vacation and talking about politics."

There is little doubt of her influence -- President Obama recently called her his "most important adviser," saying, "In terms of broad strokes advice, what ordinary people are going through -- she is somebody who I think is deeply attuned to it."

How she uses that influence and its impact remains to be seen.

"I think she is instructional without being didactic, and I think she can use her talents and have great effect, without being controversial," said Carl Anthony Sferrazza, historian at the National First Ladies' Library. "There will be controversy if there is no substance."

Some want the first lady to focus her efforts on issues of particular concern to African-Americans.

Newsweek correspondent Allison Samuels wrote in a recent essay that she was disappointed in what the first lady has done so far, given her unique ability to transform the image of black women and put a face on important issues that affect them.

"I want to know how she feels about children killing children back in her hometown of Chicago. Or whether she has any ideas about how to stop the ever-increasing numbers of African-American women falling victim to AIDS," Samuels said. "These too-often-neglected issues need a face like Michelle's."

But White House aides say critics should slow their rush to judgment.

"As the first African-American first lady, her impact will be seen in much larger and many different ways," said Camille Johnston, director of communications for the first lady. "She probably won't walk away at the end of four or eight years and have a slogan attached to her name, and that should be OK -- and potentially have much more of an impact."

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