# A New Housewife: How Eleanor Roosevelt Challenged the Role of First Lady Through Rhetoric

A First Lady in the early twentieth century did not concern herself with creating a strong public persona. Instead, she took on a socially acceptable lifestyle that was rooted in domesticity. Her primary focus was serving as the nation's hostess in the White House, planning social events, and managing the household while championing her husband and his presidency. The role slowly broadened to include the promotion of non-political causes or charitable causes, but still, the First Lady's influence remained largely private and symbolic. Plenty of those preconceived notions were altered in 1933 when Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn into the White House. Under the circumstances of limited public and political engagement, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a hugely transformative figure. As an activist, journalist, and humanitarian, she redrew the boundaries of what a First Lady could say and do, stepping into political conversations with unprecedented public visibility. Through her use of public rhetoric, whether through her nationally syndicated newspaper column, speeches, radio broadcasts, and published works, Roosevelt redefined the office by challenging gender expectations, establishing her own credibility, and fostering a direct connection with the diverse American audience. Highlighted in "The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt," a study by Betty Houchin Winfield reveals how Roosevelt remodeled the role of First Lady into a public-facing, communicative player by saying, "Through her columns, speeches and press conferences, Roosevelt created a direct channel with the American people that bypassed traditional gate-keepers of power" (Winfield 702). This essay analyzes how Roosevelt's public appearance, strategic choice of communicative platforms, and navigation of gendered politics reshaped the First Lady's role, leaving a lasting precedent on women's public leadership.

As the longest serving First Lady, Roosevelt maintained her public persona through her ethos. She portrayed herself as a trusted, compassionate, and authoritative figure that people, especially women, could listen to. Her nationally syndicated newspaper column appeared in papers all across the country six days a week for more than 26 years. Additionally, because this was during the radio age, she frequently appeared on air either alone discussing everyday issues, social concerns, and international affairs or conversing with prominent figures such as David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel about diplomatic cooperation. She was frequently noted as empathetic due to her customary visits to factories, mines, schools, and conversations with ordinary Americans. This led them to think that she was just like them, closing the distance between speaker and audience. Not to mention, she was also seen as fearless due to her frequent address to controversial national issues such as civil rights, poverty, workers' rights. Long before her husband's presidency, her cachet was established through her activism. Anya Luscombe and Dario Fazzi authored "Eleanor Roosevelt and Diplomacy in the Public Interest" and mention, "In the 1920s already she played an instrumental role in formal bodies such as the League of Women Voters, the Women's Trade Union League, the Women's Division of the Democratic party, but also informally in her teaching at the Todhunter School for girls, the charity work in the tenements of New York City, her visits around the country meeting ordinary folk and her work as a journalist and commentator" (Liscombe and Fazzi, 3).

Roosevelt often balanced femininity and power, two words that were rarely used in relation to one another. She used feminine traits such as care, morality, and compassion as taps of political authority. More than not, she was able to frame political issues as moral obligations which allowed her to speak forcefully without sounding threatening. Take her 1948 speech "The Struggle for Human Rights" for example. The excerpt "We must not be deluded by the efforts of

the forces of reaction to prostitute the great words of our free tradition and thereby confuse the struggle. Democracy, freedom, human rights have come to have a definite meaning to the people of the world which we must not allow any nation to so change that they are made synonymous with suppression and dictatorship" (Roosevelt) is a perfect indication of how she mixes morality with authority. She frames democratic values like freedom and human rights as ethical obligations while, at the same time, asserting her political credibility by warning against nations that might distort the definitions of these principles for oppressive purposes. Eleanor reframed gender expectations to justify her public engagement.

Her moral appeals are a reason why she was widely influential across the nation. She appealed to shared values of democracy, responsibility, and fairness. She used ethical appeals to advocate for human rights and humanitarian issues and made herself digestible through her intentionally direct language. Her "My Day" column was accessible because it was strategically written at an 8th-10th grade reading level. She adopted a conversational tone in her speeches and broadcasts that fostered an intimate and trustful relationship with the audience. She made use of personal anecdotes through sharing stories from travels, meetings with citizens, and her own upbringing. Through personal vulnerability, she seemed relatable and in-touch with the American people.

Many challenges were thrown at Roosevelt as a woman in male-dominated politics. Oftentimes, she faced media criticism for being "too political" or "too outspoken," things that few preceding First Ladies were accused of. Opponents of Roosevelt habitually claimed that she far exceeded the "acceptable" role of First Lady, in turn, she taught herself how to navigate accusations of being unfeminine because of her passionate thoughts on politics. This made her work harder to legitimize her public voice in a culture that expected women to be routinely silent

on political matters. Her rhetorical persona deeply mattered. It helped shift the public's expectations on what a First Lady should encapsulate. It modeled a kind of political leadership that was led by morale and ethics, that blended private and public spheres. All in all, it laid the groundwork for following First Ladies to speak more openly and politically, without fear of criticism.

Eleanor Roosevelt did not keep a detailed, regularly updated diary; however her nationally syndicated newspaper column, "My Day," served as the only existing account of her thoughts and public actions. The column, while not a complete record of her everyday activities, revealed interesting rhetoric of where she traveled, who she met, what she read and what plays she attended, and of course, how she was able to handle the pressure of public life as a First Lady of the United States. The column was written in a diary-like tone meant to be understood by anyone no matter their background. It was informal yet still intelligible, blending the personal with the political. It covered challenging themes such as civil rights, poverty, education, workers' conditions, and women's issues as well as personal reflections from current events like war, legislation, and humanitarian crises. All topics that she frequently talked about through a "behind the scenes" lens. The column reached millions of readers daily, achieved by its intimate and familiar tone. The column was able to connect national issues to everyday experiences, encouraging civic engagement from Americans all over. This column became the leading form of direct communication used by Roosevelt that sifted through traditional male-dominated media filters.

Roosevelt also imposed her rhetoric through speeches and radio broadcasts. These were usually more direct, formal, and practiced compared to her newspaper column, but still clear. Through her public speeches such as "The Struggle for Human Rights," she adopted a more

public and authoritative persona that led her to be taken more seriously and well, heard. In her broadcasts and speeches, she tackled many of the same themes that she wrote about in her column such as her advocation for civil rights, social welfare, and international cooperation also while addressing national crises like the Great Depression and World War II. She strategically framed complex political issues as moral responsibilities that should garner appropriate attention. The radio expanded her audience beyond just readers, it also reached listeners in rural communities and those that might not have had the means to access her column in the newspapers. The radio allowed her to speak in real time which created a sense of urgency. Her credibility as a public-facing figure was strengthened due to her willingness to speak anywhere from labor unions, women's groups, and international organizations which deemed her as accessible and solicitous.

She also portrayed her rhetorical influence through books and letters. For example, her post-humuously published book "Tomorrow is Now" allowed her to develop personal long-form arguments on democracy, citizenship, and human rights. It positioned her as an intellectual and political thinker, and not just a mere public figure. Through letters and books, she influenced public opinion and highlighted policies and leadership roles. Her writings connected her with the United Nations and human rights causes and her books extended her influence beyond just the tenure as First Lady.

Roosevelt strategically adapted her rhetorical style across different mediums, her tone shifting alongside it. Her column was informal, immediate, and anecdotal but it built trust and reliability. Her radio broadcasts were immediate and emotionally connected with the audience. Her speeches were oftentimes more structured and authoritative, more suited for political and social advocacy. And her books were reflective and analytical, allowing for depth and

complexity. This demonstrated her rhetorical versatility reached different audiences from housewives, workers, policymakers, and international communities. This helped her shape public discourse from multiple angles and strengthened her overall impact by tailoring her message to meet the expectations and strengths of each medium. Anya Luscombe and Dario Fazzi mention this in the journal "Spring 2017: Eleanor Roosevelt and Diplomacy in the Public Interest," saying "She campaigned for the rights of women, children and minorities. In public utterances she encouraged people to take an active interest in politics, to contribute towards the achievement of peace. Her astute perception of the vital role the media played, enabled her to use various communication methods (columns, books, speeches, radio and television) to educate the general public and aim at creating a shared identity, both in the US and between the US and other countries, most notably transatlantic allies" (Luscombe, Fazzi 3).

Eleanor Roosevelt challenged and, ultimately overcame, gender expectations in the 20th century. The First Ladies that came before her were expected to be quiet, supportive, and apolitical. Public speaking on political issues was frequently seen as improper for women, especially women in the White House. Outspoken women who were politically active were portrayed as unfeminine or overly ambitious in the media, regularly encouraged to stop sticking their noses in areas that "did not concern them." However, Eleanor Roosevelt was not too concerned with these expectations, in fact, she routinely spoke publicly on highly political issues, advocated for marginalized groups, traveled independently, inspected factories, visited war zones, all activities that were highly unusual for a First Lady. She even held press conferences that were exclusively to be heard by female reporters to elevate women in Journalism. Maurine H. Beasley highlights her commitment to helping women in the workforce in her journal "Women of the Washington Press: Politics, Prejudice, and Persistence," in saying "By banning

men, she compelled some male editors to hire women journalists to report on these gatherings. Vague in their intent and execution, the conferences illustrated the dimensions of news assignments considered appropriate for most women reporters. By male standards their news value may have been minimal, but they acquired significance in the context of increasing opportunities for Washington women journalists" (Beasley 58). Roosevelt was committed to being a voice that people not only listened to, but a voice that people would instructionally follow.

Preceding First Ladies were far different than Roosevelt in their communication efforts. Jackie Kennedy embraced a more traditional, elegant, apolitical image, using style and cultural diplomacy rather than overt political rhetoric. Lady Bird Johnson was more publicly active but still constrained, focusing on beautification and environmental projects, causes that were cast as "safe" feminine causes. Compared to both, Roosevelt exercised far greater political freedom, setting a precedent that later First Ladies expanded cautiously. Roosevelt expanded the boundaries of permissible female political speech and navigated criticism to create a new model of a politically engaged First Lady.

Her rhetoric is more powerful when understanding the historical context and impact. Major political events shaped her rhetoric like the Great Depression. During this sensitive time, her messages emphasized compassion, relief, and government responsibility. During World War II she used rhetoric to promote unity, sacrifice, civil defense, and human rights. She could understand what exactly the American audience needed because she, herself, was just like them. She knew that Americans sought after reassurance, guidance, and moral clarity in a time of crisis. Additionally, her accessible and steady communication met the public's need for connection and trust. She heavily influenced women's political participation by modeling a new

powerful public female voice for women in leadership roles. She frequently encouraged women to participate in civic duties, volunteerism, and political advocacy as well as helping women legitimize speaking publicly on national issues. And again, she completely expanded the First Lady's role by shifting the role from ceremonial to politically active.

Eleanor Roosevelt and her rhetoric had a lasting impact on not only subsequent First Ladies, but the nation in general. She influenced future First Ladies like Hillary Clinton who adopted a policy-focused, outspoken public role similar to Roosevelt's. She advocated for health care and women's rights and later found herself on one of the biggest stages a woman can get to in the US when she ran for president in 2016. Like Roosevelt, Michelle Obama, 44th First Lady of the US, used accessible language and personal storytelling to connect with the American people regarding topics like healthier foods in schools and combating child obesity. Both of these ladies embraced activism and visibility that was built off of Roosevelt's blueprint. Roosevelt had a lasting impact on women's politics that helped begin the normalization process for women speaking publicly on a national and even global level. She demonstrated that moral authority and political leadership can coexist in the same realm of  women's rhetoric. Roosevelt redefined the First Lady as a public advocate, not just a mere ceremonial figure, setting a precedent for women's activism and public communication. She proved that First Ladies can do more than their usual domestic duties, they have the power to shape public opinion, elevate social causes, and directly address citizens.

Eleanor Roosevelt transformed the role of the First Lady through her powerful rhetorical nuances, moral authority, and political engagement, challenging gender expectations, irrevocably expanding women's public influence in the 20th century and beyond. Her rhetorical persona blended compassion with authority, something that few any other political figure was doing at

this point. She adapted her message across multiple communication mediums from daily newspapers to remembered speeches in front of the world's most powerful figures. She warped gendered political expectations through her fearlessness to be heard, seen, and understood. Her legacy ultimately set new standards for women's leadership and civic participation, not just domestically in the US, but in the entire world. Even today, Roosevelt stands as a foundational figure in the evolution of women's political communication. She reached greater heights that most people, even men of the time, could only imagine doing. Her work paved the way for future First Ladies and women leaders to speak boldly, advocate publicly, and mold national discourse. She remains as a model for understanding how rhetoric has the potential to redefine gender roles.

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A First Lady in the early twentieth century did not concern herself with creating a strong public persona. Instead, she took on a socially acceptable lifestyle that was rooted in domesticity. Her primary focus was serving as the nation's hostess in the White House, planning social events, and managing the household while championing her husband and his presidency. The role slowly broadened to include the promotion of non-political causes or charitable causes, but still, the First Lady's influence remained largely private and symbolic. Plenty of those preconceived notions were altered in 1933 when Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn into the White House. Under the circumstances of limited public and political engagement, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a hugely transformative figure. As an activist, journalist, and humanitarian, she redrew the boundaries of what a First Lady could say and do, stepping into political conversations with unprecedented public visibility. Through her use of public rhetoric, whether through her nationally syndicated newspaper column, speeches, radio broadcasts, and published works, Roosevelt redefined the office by challenging gender expectations, establishing her own credibility, and fostering a direct connection with the diverse American audience. Highlighted in "The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt," a study by Betty Houchin Winfield reveals how Roosevelt remodeled the role of First Lady into a public-facing, communicative player by saying, "Through her columns, speeches and press conferences, Roosevelt created a direct channel with the American people that bypassed traditional gate-keepers of power" (Winfield 702). This essay analyzes how Roosevelt's public appearance, strategic choice of communicative platforms, and navigation of gendered politics reshaped the First Lady's role, leaving a lasting precedent on women's public leadership.

In the 20th-century, a First Lady such as Lady Bird Johnson, Jackie Kennedy, or Lou Hoover did not concern themselves with a large and strong public persona. Instead, their primary focus was on adopting a socially acceptable lifestyle rooted in domesticity. They served as the nation's hostess whether it be planning social events in the White House or managing the household and its respected duties all the while championing her husband and his presidency. Over time, the role had gradually broadened where she could feel comfortable promoting non-political or charitable causes but still, the First Lady's presence was expected to remain private, ceremonial, and symbolic. That preconceived notion changed when Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt were sworn into the White House in 1933. Under the circumstances of limited public and political engagement, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a hugely transformative figure. As an activist, journalist, and humanitarian, she redrew the boundaries of what a First Lady could say and do, stepping into political conversations with unprecedented public visibility. Her use of public rhetoric, whether through her nationally syndicated newspaper column or her public speeches delivered on some of the biggest stages in the world, Roosevelt redefined the office by challenging gender expectations, establishing her own credibility, and fostering a direct connection with the diverse American audience. Highlighted in "The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt," a study by Betty Houchin Winfield reveals how Roosevelt remodeled the role of First Lady into a public-facing, communicative player by saying, "Through her columns, speeches and press conferences, Roosevelt created a direct channel with the American people that bypassed traditional gate-keepers of power" (Winfield 702). This essay analyzes how Roosevelt's public appearance, strategic choice of communicative platforms, and navigation of gendered politics reshaped the First Lady's role, leaving a lasting precedent on women's public leadership.