



Who Wears the Pants? Hillary Clinton's Prospective First Gentleman

By [David C. Wilson](#)

Candidates for the presidential election of 2008 have many big-name endorsers. Republican Mike Huckabee has the public support of martial arts star and actor Chuck Norris. Democrat Barack Obama has the public support of entertainer and entrepreneur Oprah Winfrey. But one could argue that none of these names tops Hillary Clinton's biggest endorser, former president Bill Clinton.

Hillary Clinton is the Democratic frontrunner in national polls. She has experience with important domestic issues such as health care, especially child health, having served as a director of the Children's Defense Fund. She has professional experience as a lawyer. Most importantly, she has political experience as a senator from New York, and from gubernatorial and presidential stints as a First Lady in both the state of Arkansas and the White House. Her successful senatorial campaigns show she is electable, and her experiences in the executive office show she understands politics. Yet, to some, Hillary is still the "former First Lady," wife of Bill Clinton.

Bill Clinton's presidency was, for the most part, extremely positive among Americans when he was in office, and remains relatively popular even today. As recently as March 2007, a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll reported a 60 percent favorability rating for the former president. In the same poll, 71 percent of adults said they believed Bill Clinton was a good president, while only 21 percent thought he was a bad one. When a more recent (September 2007) ABC News/*Washington Post* poll of U.S. adults asked, "Thinking back to when Bill Clinton was in office, would you say



you approve or disapprove of the way Clinton handled his job as president?" 66 percent said they approved. Whether the aura of the Clinton name offers a potential boost for Hillary, however, is for the most part speculative, and questions remain about Bill Clinton's impact on Hillary's candidacy, and what role(s) he would play as "First Gentleman" in the White House.

As a first lady, Hillary Clinton was loved by Clinton supporters, but critics sometimes attacked her for getting involved in "her husband's job." Many saw her official involvement in political matters as unsuccessful. Her health-care plan ultimately failed, and she eventually retreated from the spotlight.

But the role the president's wife should play has always been a topic of national debate. Traditionally, First Ladies have been expected to be outgoing, attractive, the president's most public supporter, and whenever possible, seen and not heard—a role that seems increasingly outdated, given huge gains for women in equality at home and in the workplace, and one that Hillary Clinton never played. Complicating matters further, the job of First Spouse itself is ambiguous. Though not on the government payroll, she or he naturally influences the president. First Spouses have budgets, a staff, and usually office space in the White House. Unlike the presidency, however, the job is not defined by law. Each spouse—until now, each First Lady—has had to shape her own role in the position.

By the same token, Bill Clinton has said he will do whatever is asked of him as the First Gentleman, but, as the "first" First Gentleman, he would set a precedent both for male First Spouses and for former presidents in the quasi-political White House office. Given the effectiveness of his presidency and his popularity, it is extremely unlikely he will simply be seen and not heard. Thus, if Hillary Clinton is elected, the



American people will get the former “President of the United States” Bill Clinton, too—but in what form?

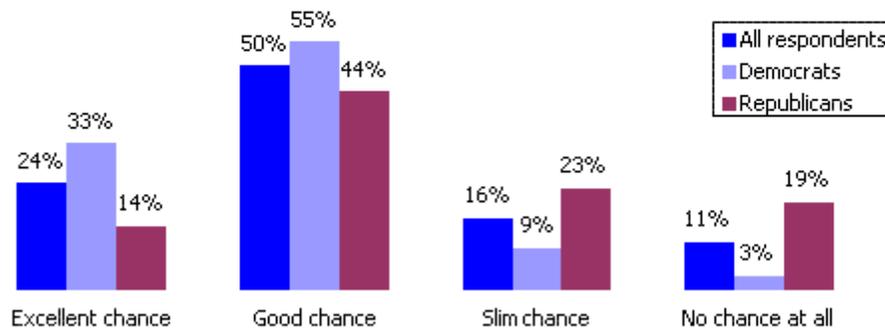
Using data from [a Gallup Poll Panel study](#) that included questions on this subject, I report how the optimism toward Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate is associated with beliefs about the role Bill Clinton would play as a presidential spouse, and what activities the public would find acceptable for Bill Clinton as a First Gentleman.

In the Gallup study, conducted February 22-25, 2007, the public was highly optimistic about Hillary Clinton’s chances of winning the presidency. As Figure 1 shows, about 73 percent of all respondents, and approximately 58 and 88 percent of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, believed Clinton had an excellent or good chance of winning in the 2008 presidential election.

Figure 1

High Optimism toward Clinton Alone

Question: Please say whether you think Hillary Clinton would have an excellent chance, a good chance, only a slim chance, or no chance at all of being elected president in November 2008.



Note: Republican and Democrat groups contain those respondents who "lean" toward the party.

Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

While these numbers were strong, they were not relative to any other candidate. In comparison to other likely candidates, the public might have been less sanguine about Clinton's chances.

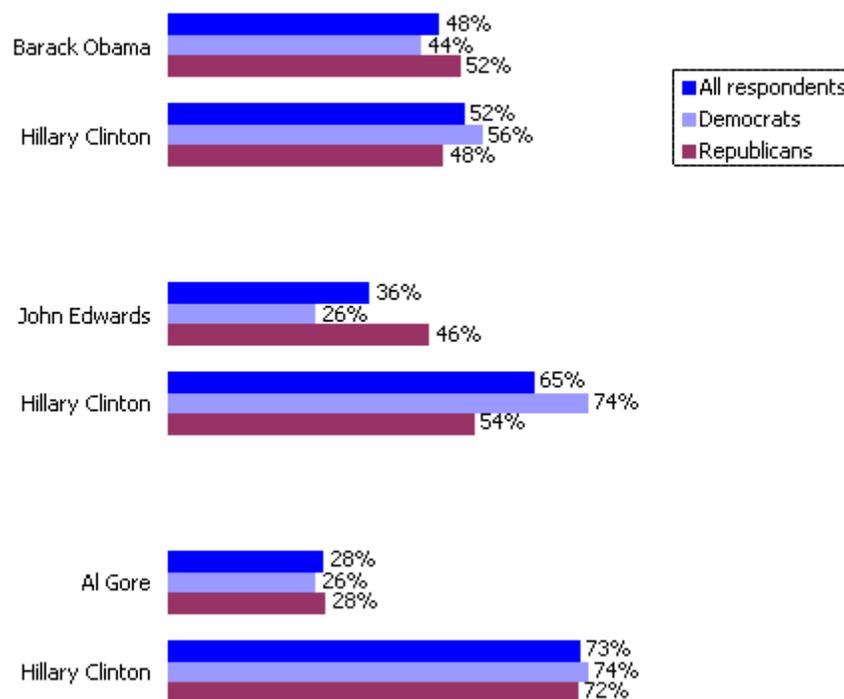
In fact, as Figure 2 shows, a Clinton victory was not completely guaranteed. When compared to other candidates in ["horse race" questions](#), Clinton had mixed results. While a slightly higher percentage of all respondents and Democrats said Clinton had a better chance of winning than Barack Obama, more Republicans believed Obama could win. Obama was the only competition among the candidates, however. Neither John Edwards nor Al Gore (the latter, of course, not running for president and included only hypothetically) was believed to have a stronger chance of winning than Clinton. These results speak to the optimism toward Hillary Clinton,

even as far back as February, indicating in turn a belief on the part of respondents that Bill Clinton might well find himself in the role of First Gentleman.

Figure 2

Mixed Results in Comparisons

Question: Who do you think would have the better chance of being elected president in 2008?



Note: Republican and Democrat groups contain those respondents who "lean" toward the party.

Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

Over the past half-century, the role of the First Spouse has become more important to American politics. Past First Ladies have been advocates of domestic issues, served as hosts to foreign dignitaries and their families and, most recently in the case of Hillary Clinton, served as public policy

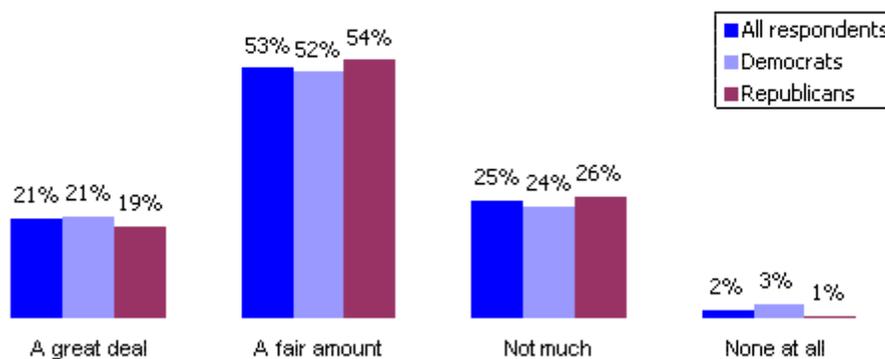
advocates. Not simply silent and invisible supporters of the president, they are a part of the presidential package voters elect.

While the public doesn't seem to believe the spouses of presidents have a great deal of power, they do believe their influence on the presidency is significant (see Figure 3). Approximately 74 percent of all respondents to the Gallup poll said presidential spouses have either "a fair amount" or "a great deal" of influence. This was true regardless of whether the respondents identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats.

Figure 3

First Spouse Influence is Significant

Question: Generally speaking, how much influence do you think presidents' spouses have over the decisions presidents make?



Note: Republican and Democrat groups contain those respondents who "lean" toward the party.

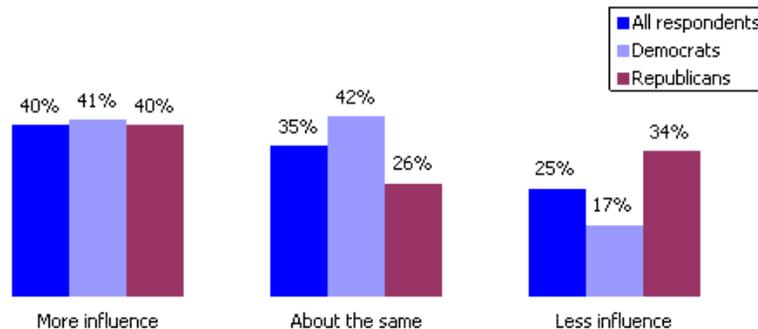
Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

With reference specifically to Bill Clinton as a First Gentleman, large majorities of Americans, especially Democrats, believed he would have at least as much influence as First Ladies have had in the past (see Figure 4). Seventy-four percent of all respondents, 66 percent of Republicans, and 83 percent of Democrats said Bill Clinton would have “about the same” amount or “more influence” than previous presidential spouses.

Figure 4

Bill Clinton's Influence

Question: If Hillary Rodham Clinton were elected president, how much influence do you think Bill Clinton would have over the decisions she would make as president? Do you think he would have... than previous presidential spouses?



Note: Republican and Democrat groups contain those respondents who “lean” toward the party.

Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

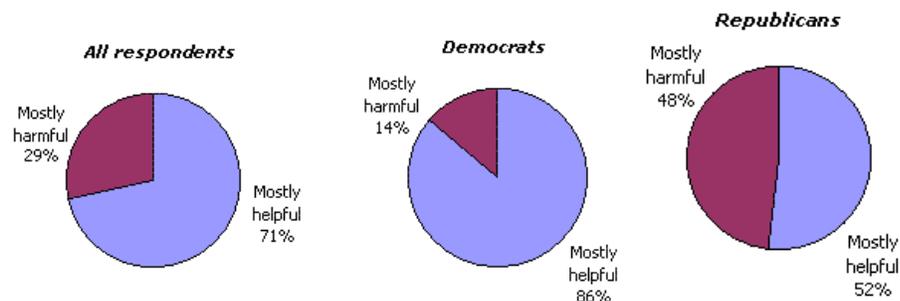
What’s more, there was a consensus among Democrats (86 percent) that Bill would be helpful to Hillary Clinton if she were elected president (Figure 5); Republicans, however, were almost evenly split on whether he would help her (52 percent) or hurt her (48 percent). (One cannot help but notice that Republicans were more likely than Democrats—by about seventeen percentage points—to believe Bill Clinton would have “less influence” than

previous presidential spouses. Could it be that Republicans hope Hillary Clinton will keep the former president “bound and gagged?” Or perhaps they believe Bill Clinton’s influence is outdated. Maybe some Republicans’ negative views of Bill Clinton are translated into bias toward anything associated with him or status. Regardless, it is puzzling why a third of Republican respondents believed a former elected president, Democrat or otherwise, would have less influence than previous First Ladies.)

Figure 5

First Gentleman Helpful

Question: If Hillary Rodham Clinton were elected president, do you think Bill Clinton would be mostly helpful or harmful to her presidency?



Note: Republican and Democrat groups contain those respondents who “lean” toward the party.

Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

The survey questions so far have assessed only whether Bill Clinton’s influence as a possible First Gentleman is helpful to Hillary’s standalone image. Although the Gallup study asked only about a few Democratic political figures, the data serve as a baseline indication of the extent to which perceptions of Bill Clinton’s influence may extend to greater or lesser



optimism about Hillary Clinton in different contexts. To examine such a question, I ran a set of basic logistic regression analyses. The analyses predicted optimism toward Hillary Clinton—that is, whether respondents thought she had a higher chance of winning—using a set of demographic control variables—age, sex, party identification, political ideology, race, region, education, and the sex of the interviewer—and two variables related to the influence of Bill Clinton—helpful or not, and amount of influence. Table 1 shows the results from the analyses.



Table 1

Adjusted Odds Ratios: Optimism toward Hillary Clinton

	Good/Excellent chance	Clinton vs. Obama	Clinton vs. Edwards	Clinton vs. Gore
Age (years)	1.00	1.01**	1.01	1.01**
Sex (male=1)	.37**	1.15	.80	.67**
Party ID (Democrat=1)	2.39**	1.43*	2.12**	1.33
Political Ideology ^a	1.77**	.87	1.10	.73**
Race (White=1)	.41**	.82	.89	.63*
Region (South=1)	.71	.99	.99	.75
College Education	1.00	1.02	.96	.97
Sex of Interviewer	1.24	1.07	1.18	.76
Bill Clinton mostly helpful	1.46*	2.34**	1.15	1.06
Bill Clinton influence	1.35**	.91	1.24*	1.01
Intercept	.61	.51	.54	6.95
Pseudo R ²	.28	.07	.08	.07
Sample size	963	929	947	951

*p<.05, **p<.01

Note: Values in table are adjusted odds ratios from logistic regression analyses. Political ideology ranges from extremely conservative (1) to extremely liberal (5).

Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

The cell values in Table 1 are adjusted odds ratios (ORs). ORs greater than one and ORs less than one indicate a positive or negative relationship, respectively, between the variable in the row and the type of optimism toward Clinton shown at the top of each column. Optimism toward a Hillary



Clinton presidency free of association with other candidates is significantly related to beliefs about the value of Bill Clinton as a First Gentleman. After controlling for the demographic variables, we find that those who believe Bill Clinton will help Hillary Clinton's presidency and those who believe he will have more influence are more likely to think Hillary has a positive chance of winning.

Some of this influence extends to Hillary Clinton when she is placed alongside both Barack Obama and John Edwards. As the second column of Table 1 shows, those who believe Bill Clinton will be helpful to Hillary are significantly more likely to believe she has a greater chance of winning than Obama. The third column shows that the more influence one believes Bill Clinton will have over the decisions Hillary Clinton makes, the more likely one believes she has a better chance of winning than John Edwards. As for comparisons to Al Gore, Bill Clinton's influence is close to null; the public's optimism towards Hillary relative to Gore is so great (see Figure 2) that positive perceptions of Bill Clinton as a First Gentleman matter very little.

The conclusion we can draw from these multivariate analyses is that perceptions of Bill Clinton as a First Gentleman appear to boost optimism towards Hillary as a standalone candidate, but they matter much less when Hillary Clinton is considered relative to other Democratic candidates.

Our next question is, what role(s) should Bill Clinton play as a First Gentleman? Respondents to the Gallup survey were asked whether or not

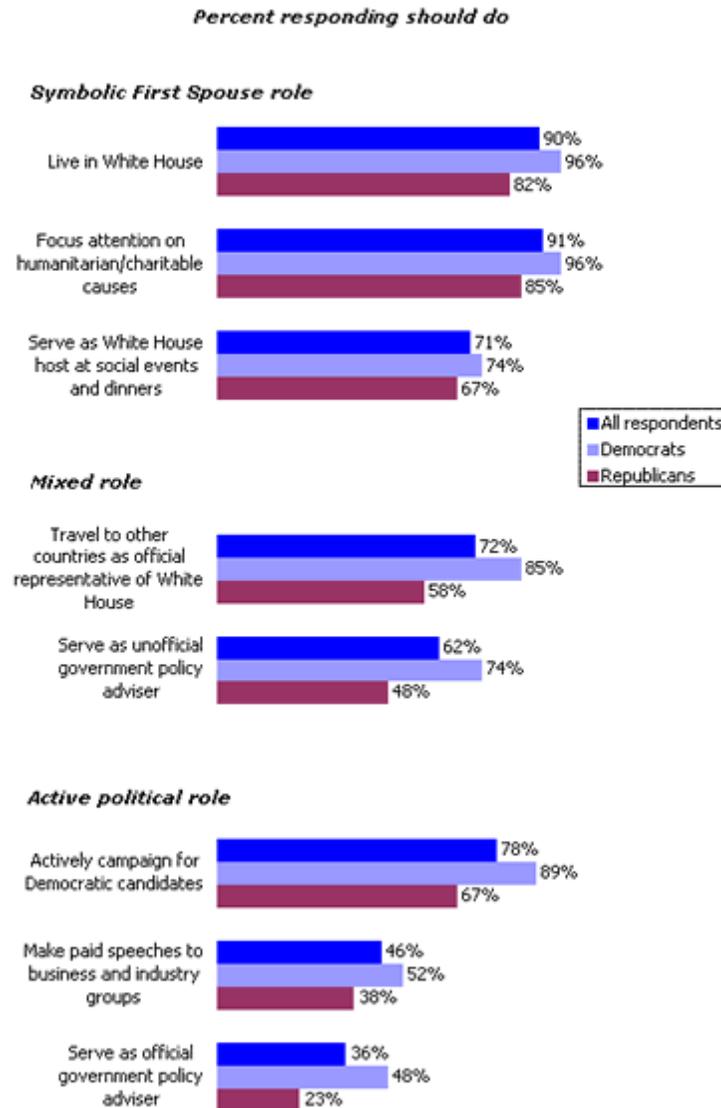


Bill Clinton “should” or “should not” take on any of eight different roles as a First Gentleman. Figure 6 shows these survey items divided into three categories based on whether they involved traditionally “symbolic” activities carried out by First Ladies in the past, “active political” duties that would clearly identify the First Gentleman’s politics, or “mixed” activities that are both symbolic and active. One thing appears certain: The public is more supportive of Bill Clinton playing a traditional symbolic role than an active political role as First Gentleman. The response distributions in the figure show a clear pattern in the percentages from top to bottom: The more active the role, the less respondents believed Bill Clinton should take it on. This pattern is, for the most part, consistent across political party affiliation.

Figure 6

Public More Supportive of Traditional Role

Question: What role(s) should Bill Clinton take on as First Spouse?



Source: Panel study by the Gallup Organization, February 22-25, 2007.

The consensus in February was that if Bill Clinton becomes the First Gentleman, he should live in the White House and focus attention on



humanitarian and charitable causes. Strong majorities also approved of his serving as a host for White House social events, acting as an official representative of the White House in other countries, and actively campaigning for Democratic candidates. Not surprisingly, the public was less supportive of Bill Clinton's making paid speeches to business and industry groups and serving as an official government policy adviser. These lower numbers may be due to fears of corruption or negative influence on the White House.

Overall, the public was most supportive of Bill Clinton serving traditionally symbolic roles and an active role related to his political party. As of now, there are no signs that the former president would actually take on any special roles as a First Gentleman, nor would he take an overly active role in politics. However, as many Americans expect, the presidency is typically a team, and Bill Clinton is expected to play his role.

In summary, the prospects of a female president and male First Gentleman are seen as relatively positive, at least among Democrats nationwide. While such optimism may or may not translate into more votes for Hillary Clinton in the various Democratic primaries, it does appear to matter overall. This may explain her relatively large lead in national polls, but smaller margins in state-level polls such as Iowa and New Hampshire. As the Democratic National Convention nears and the primaries go into full swing, the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign team will have to make important decisions



about just how to use and frame Bill Clinton as both a political endorser and potential First Gentleman. The results from the Gallup data suggest they should stick to the script of previous First Ladies, and let the (potential) president wear the pants.

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Additional Readings

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