

**The More Influential, the More Controversial: How Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón
Broke Gender Norms and Redefined the Role of First Lady**

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón were two women with name recognition, political influence, and a reputation that followed them. Eleanor Roosevelt was first lady in the United States from 1933 - 1945 and Eva Perón in Argentina from 1946 - 1952, and they pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be a first lady. They had trailblazing roles and were arguably two of the most powerful women in the history of their countries. After their deaths, their legacies continue to influence the globe.

Although both women were accomplished figures in the public sphere, their personal lives often overshadowed their political success. More favorable light shines on Eleanor compared to Eva. Roosevelt is remembered as a politically accomplished and rational woman. On the other hand, Eva Perón's unstable personal life often takes center stage. She is frequently remembered for her emotional volatility and her life before becoming first lady. This legacy, at least outside of Argentina, is partially due to the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Evita*, popularizing the infamous portrait of the former first lady. Eva Perón's infamous and overly sexualized image is more attractive to popular culture than that of a well-behaved woman. For both Roosevelt and Perón, I will not focus on their personal lives, but instead focus on comparing the ideas and political strategies of these two politically successful women.

The legacies of Roosevelt and Perón live on today, demonstrating their lasting impact and influence on their respective societies and the globe. Historical sites preserve the memory and story of the Roosevelt family, many maintained through the United States National Park Service for future generations to see and enjoy. Eleanor Roosevelt's accomplishments, particularly her

later work with the United Nations, also live on in policy and history. Eva's image is not forgotten in Argentina either. In Buenos Aires, buildings display Eva's image and flowers from her admirers continue to decorate her grave. She also has a museum dedicated to upholding a favorable and wholesome image of the former first lady. These women made a lasting mark on the world during their tenures as first lady, enough so to remain relevant in contemporary culture.

A fascinating comparison emerges because of the importance and accomplishments of Roosevelt and Perón, despite their contrasting images. When visiting Val Kil and Hyde Park in New York, it dawned on me that much of what was said of Eleanor Roosevelt was information and critique I had heard about Eva Perón. Specifically, both women were strong and determined to accomplish their political goals, and faced challenges and criticism because of the pioneering nature of their actions. This intrigued me because I had always thought of them separately, and as not having many similarities. Roosevelt and Perón have always been of interest to me because of their strength and importance to society during their times in power. I was particularly interested in Eva because I studied abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I saw her lasting presence, and because of her conflicting, and largely unresolved, identity.

Abundant research exists that studies both women individually, but little scholarly research has compared Roosevelt and Perón. Through this direct comparison, I will take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from: History; Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies; Public Affairs; Latin American Studies; Literature; Spanish; and English. History will be the main discipline but I am using lenses from Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies and Public Affairs to analyze the role of gender within this time period, and specifically women with political ties. Latin American Studies, an interdisciplinary discipline in itself, addresses a wide

range of aspects related to Eva Perón and Argentina, including the role of women and politics. Textual analysis was essential, drawing from Spanish and English disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach will benefit the comparison because of the many dimensions of the women; using one angle alone would ignore many of their achievements, writings, and influences. This approach will lead to a cross-cultural comparison of gender roles in the United States and Argentina during this time period for women in influential positions.

Much more could be said regarding both Roosevelt and Perón, but for the scope of this paper, I will focus on their times as first lady. Their upbringings were starkly different and contributed to their political roles, and while this will be covered it will not be the focus. A comparison of their upbringings could be another paper in itself. For Perón, her years as first lady were her most politically active and influential. This was not the case for Eleanor Roosevelt. Her direct influence extended well beyond her days in the White House. For the scope of this paper, I will focus on Roosevelt's time as first lady and not her achievements after the death of Franklin Roosevelt.

A comparison of these two first ladies is sometimes made casually and in literature, but a comparison of their relationship to gender norms is not common. This paper will help fill a void in literature because much can be learned through comparing their roles. The comparison will help us understand the influence of gender norms on first ladies in two contexts, revealing similarities and patterns regarding how powerful women straddled the line of gender norms. It will also highlight contradictions between the treatment of the two women, illuminating hypocrisies.

The comparison is significant because of the world's continuing discussion regarding women in politics. With the recent increase in sexual harassment accusations against men in

various high-power positions, these claims illuminate the role of gender, gender relations, and power within politics. Hillary Clinton, who ran for president in 2008 and 2016 in the United States, personified the challenges women in the political arena face when in positions with such high visibility and power, specifically their need to balance their traditional and political roles. If this topic were to be expanded to more contemporary figures, many of the same themes would likely arise.

In the beginning stages of writing this thesis, I expected that Roosevelt broke norms much more than Perón. Feminist critics often chastise Perón for her references to her husband and how she said she did everything for him, minimizing her own agency. However, I was surprised to find the extent to which Perón did break typical Argentine women's norms and how Roosevelt was more cautious in her push for social and political change. Likely Perón's pioneering actions drew the ire of some of her critics, who said she was a brash and aggressive woman. I argue that both Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón broke gender norms during their time as first lady, and they straddled both their traditional womanly role in the private sphere with that of a political actor in the public sphere. Both women worked for policy changes and women's rights, although Perón used much more forceful language, created a Peronist image, and pushed the boundaries more than did Roosevelt.

This thesis will be broken into various sections. I will begin with an analysis of the past writings and key sources upon which I drew my conclusions, followed by analysis. The analysis will begin as a narration of the history of Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón and their respective countries, the United States and Argentina. It will transition into a comparison between the women, revealing differences and similarities in their relationships with typical gender norms. A conclusion will summarize the findings and any limitations to the research.

Chapter 2 - A History of the Sources

Abundant literature discusses Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón at all points of their lives, as their stories have captivated the interest of many historians, biographers, anthropologists, and everyday people. Through their research, scholars influenced both women's images and legacies. The literature on Roosevelt comes from various scholarly sources, presenting events as factual, with less doubt surrounding her life. Scholars depict Roosevelt as a researched and understood historical figure whereas they present Perón with emotion, creating doubt around her history. The emotions surrounding the name Eva Perón are inescapable, as many people wrote about the former first lady with love or hate. The secondary sources and their scholars provide insight into the historical context and women's role in society. For both Roosevelt and Perón, I use primary sources written or spoken by each woman in order to understand their actions without the emotional connection and influence of the secondary sources.

The secondary sources for both Roosevelt and Perón provide background into women's roles in the United States and Argentina during the 20th century, and the socio-economic and political landscape that fueled and challenged their tenures as first lady. For Roosevelt, scholars highlight the impact of the Great Depression and World War II on women's role in the workforce and in society. For Perón, the sources show the socioeconomic changes in Buenos Aires, and Argentina in general, with the changing demographics. Scholars also discuss the lives of both Roosevelt and Perón before entering the political arena and the effect of their presence on policy issues.

The primary sources illuminate the perspectives of Roosevelt and Perón regarding these societal issues and changes presented in the secondary sources. I analyze the speeches and various writings of the first ladies to reveal and understand their perspectives. This helps uncover how they presented political issues, and how they presented themselves as women and political actors. The secondary sources provide the context to these primary sources to reveal the external forces influencing their thoughts.

Perón's autobiographies provide an over-the-top depiction of herself and her relationship with her husband, and portray the image she wanted cemented in history. While valuable in knowing how she hoped to portray herself in literature and history, I do not focus on her autobiographies because of the controversy regarding their authenticity. Despite this uncertainty, they provided insight into the public and immortal image that Perón tried to portray. Her two autobiographies were *My Message* (1987) and *My Mission in Life* (1951). *Mi Mensaje*, translated to *My Message*, was published by Peronist historian Fermin Chavez in 1987, after the manuscript had been deemed lost (Page, 1996, p. 1). The original version of *La Razon de mi Vida*, translated to *My Mission in Life*, was published in October 1951 (p. 119). Their publication dates reinforce their roles as tools to remember the name Eva Perón. Joseph Page's introduction to these sources helped me approach the English translations of *My Message* and *My Mission in Life* by providing background information on Perón herself and insight on how to interpret the writings. He explained that consensus agrees that *My Mission in Life* was not the work of Perón, despite her author credit, but Perón likely wrote parts of *My Message* (p. 30).

Elaborate references to Juan Perón and the Argentine people fill these books, creating a grand role for herself as first lady. Despite her self-important role, she still belittled herself, perhaps hoping for sympathy. Yet she overinflated the importance and role of her husband. In

My Message she wrote in Spanish, and here translated by Page, "...I don't know which was more worthy of a small life like mine, but a life in the end - one, to fight for the rights of my people, and the other, to watch Perón's back" (Page, 1996, p. 56). Similarly, she later wrote about her willingness to die for Perón and the Argentine people (p. 57), diminishing her importance compared to that of her husband and the general public. Similar themes are found throughout her speeches as well, playing into the hands of the sources who saw her as trying to play a martyr's role. Perón's autobiographies delivered her immortal image but the accuracy of their content has been heavily analyzed, while the speeches were examples of communication for various audiences throughout her tenure as first lady.

To uncover Eva Perón's views and strategies, I rely on her speeches from her time as first lady. I do not know who wrote Perón's speeches and therefore a layer of doubt must be cast upon whether she had a role in their creation. Despite that unknown, Perón did deliver these speeches, demonstrating her commitment to their message. The editors of Eva Perón's *Discursos Completos*, Hurst & Roch, stated that they scoured many newspapers and sources to find everything they could that Eva said, and subsequently published their entire findings (p. 26). Mostly I analyze her speeches, due to their abundance, but I also examine some newspaper writings. These were written similarly to speeches with many of the same goals. She delivered the speeches mainly in person, but some were broadcast over the radio. While the editors compiled all the sources they found, it is important to acknowledge that sources may have been destroyed after the Peronist period.

The speeches were more reliable than her autobiographies because they demonstrated a more well-rounded and less showy version of the former Argentine first lady. Like the autobiographies, while they may not have been written by Perón, they were published under her

name, demonstrating her approval of their content. Perón's speeches addressed a variety of audiences and attempted to create excitement regarding the current salient issue, whereas the autobiographies were written to create a permanent and extravagant legacy. Topics included unions, women's organizations, and women's suffrage. She wrote in newspapers, with various audiences, but with similar messages throughout. The focus on important issues allowed for a deeper understanding of her political aims at that time, instead of her desire to create a lasting image. These are a reliable source because they were spoken live by Perón herself, demonstrating her commitment to their message.

While it does not provide insight into Perón's thoughts, Mary Main's 1952 controversial and propagandist book, *The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón*, demonstrates the perspective of many people from the upper class in Buenos Aires towards Eva Perón. Main's book, although she went by the pseudonym Maria Flores, fueled the image of Perón as the overly sexual, crude, and inappropriate woman, and is a prime example of the emotions that surrounded Perón's name. Several comments highlight the author's disdain for Eva, such as her reference to her as "this actress person" and calling Eva the kind of woman who should receive the charity from the Argentine Benevolent Society, not someone who should be in charge of it (p. 102). Published by Doubleday & Company, this source created an entertaining and dramatic story without regard to scholarly research. Additionally, Main did not live in Buenos Aires during the first Peronist period, leaving not long after Perón's election (p. 9). It must also be noted that this was published in 1952, capitalizing on the swirl of emotions in Buenos Aires regarding Eva Perón.

The secondary sources on Perón examined her personal background and the socioeconomic landscape of Argentina, providing context for my analysis of the primary sources. Fraser and Navarro's 1996 edition of their biography, *Evita, the Real Life of Eva Perón*, provided

a well-rounded account of Eva and Juan Perón and Peronism itself, while challenging assumptions made by other authors. This biography complemented the anthropological perspective of J.M. Taylor's, *Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman* (1979), that confronted the myths about Perón, analyzing the various ideologies and personas regarding the first lady. By analyzing the myths, Taylor attempted to dispel them but simultaneously to find their origins and how they shaped Perón's image. These myths include Eva the Revolutionary, Eva the Saint, Eva the Lady of Hope, Eva the Mother, and Eva the Nazi (Taylor, 1979).

In order to understand Eva Perón's tenure as first lady, I consulted various sources addressing the changing state of Argentina. Guy (2009) and Tossounian (2013) examined women's associations and movements in 20th-century Argentina. Both authors illustrated the traditional gender roles of women during this time in Argentina. Deutsch (2012) examined the gender roles of women in politics, particularly those who were in the *Junta de La Victoria*, or Victory Board, a women's anti-fascist group in Argentina (p. 221). Despite their radical aims, this organization still gave women tasks that aligned with women's gender roles, with "emphasis on knitting, healthcare, and children" (p. 231). These sources demonstrated the importance and prominence of traditional female roles in Argentina during this time.

Karush and Chamosa's 2010 book *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina* provided a variety of chapters regarding Peronism and the changes of 20th-century Argentina. The chapter "Peronists and Cabecitas: Stereotypes and Anxieties at the Peak of Social Change" by Natalia Milanesio looked at the term *cabecita negra* which became widely used in Argentina in the 1940s with the emergence of Peronism (p. 53) and analyzed stereotypes that presented themselves during Peronism. *Cabecita negra* referred to "the recent migrant population from the provinces" and its usage contained heavy

racist connotations (p. 53). Milanesio emphasized how it became hard to tell people's social classes with the extreme growth of Buenos Aires during the 20th century. This was a time of social changes, and therefore many in Argentina saw this migration in racist and classist manner, calling it a "barbaric invasion" (p. 58).

Contrasting the mystery surrounding Perón's sources, scholars portray a more stable and factual image of Roosevelt. For primary sources, I analyzed Roosevelt's press conferences, her *My Day* newspaper column, and her autobiographies. These sources were all intended for different audiences; her conferences for female reporters, her *My Day* column for contemporary readers, and her autobiography for future readers with an interest in the former first lady. These established her opinion on diverse topics and demonstrated how she delivered the messages to various listeners. Drawing on different sources allowed me to see various personas and images of Roosevelt, not one rehearsed identity.

In all three primary sources, Roosevelt discussed similar topics but her audience changed, and with that so did her tone and sometimes her message. Roosevelt's White House press conferences addressed a group of female reporters with whom she gained trust and friendship. These were important because they demonstrated how she presented herself to a group of working women as a working woman herself. These women were also breaking gender norms as only a small fraction of women were journalists. In the 1920s and 1930s, in the United States, less than 1% of women worked as reporters (Watts, 2010, p. 46). In this setting, Roosevelt presented new issues particularly important to women. She addressed recognition for women's work, encouraged women's political participation, validated women's political worth, and expressed frustration for women's lack of political support for other women. The conferences

illuminated Roosevelt's more intimate and groundbreaking thoughts that she expressed trustingly with other women.

Roosevelt's *My Day* syndicated newspaper column also addressed current events but its audience was broader than the conferences, as the column was published for the public. I relied on *My Day* columns as a source that demonstrated a mixture of Roosevelt's identity as a mother, a working woman, and a political woman. She often tried to relate to the readers, such as when she said she also watched her personal spending and when she talked about her family. Similarly to her conferences, she expressed her appreciation for women's worth in the workforce, in the house, and in politics. These articles demonstrated the public image she wanted to express to everyday citizens of the United States and to the world.

Roosevelt's autobiographies also imprinted a lasting public image. Roosevelt wrote her autobiographies over the course of her life, but I used the condensed version originally published in 1961. Roosevelt had a prominent role in creating this version of the book which she described as "both an abbreviated and an augmented edition of my autobiography" (Roosevelt, 1961, p.xv). Therefore, I will address her autobiography as one source, despite the originals having been written and published at different times. In her autobiography, Roosevelt addressed everything from her upbringing to the details of her time as first lady. In contrast to Perón's autobiographies, there is no doubt whether Roosevelt penned these books, and she did not present herself as first lady in such a grand and often ostentatious manner as did Perón. Roosevelt addressed the same issues as she did in her conferences and *My Day* column, but in a more historical sense, touching less on the salient issues of the time and focusing more on broader topics. In addition to her upbringing and her life before the White House, Roosevelt addressed her role as a mother with children in the war and her concerns regarding the position

as first lady. The background information was helpful by providing context for the shift in Roosevelt's political perspective throughout her years and how she came to the opinions she expressed in her column and conferences. Similar to Perón's autobiographies, this source was created to leave a historical legacy and presented a Roosevelt-approved image of herself.

The secondary sources complemented the primary sources on Roosevelt, as they reinforced the themes she wrote about, provided insight into her female contemporaries, and described the country's current social, economic, and political state. Youngs' 1985 biography, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*, followed Eleanor Roosevelt's life from childhood until death, and analyzed her blending of a public persona with her identity as a friend, wife, and mother. Youngs provided a well-rounded account of her life with the mixture of sources he used. He was understandably more critical of some of Roosevelt's family members and portrayed more strain in her relationship with her mother-in-law than Eleanor herself admitted in her autobiographies. The author also demonstrated the challenges and tragedies that plagued her generally privileged childhood. Roosevelt's family friend, Joseph Lash, also wrote various books regarding the Roosevelt family, per the family's request. While it must be acknowledged that Lash was a close family confidant and likely reluctant to disparage the family, he did have a level of insight that others without that relationship did not, making him a valuable source.

Focusing on Roosevelt's life before the White House, McGuire's 2014 article, "Beginning an 'Extraordinary Opportunity': Eleanor Roosevelt, Molly Dewson, and the expansion of women's boundaries in the Democratic Party, 1924–1934", demonstrated how Roosevelt broke gender norms with her roles in political organizations. After women achieved national suffrage, this resulted in a subsequent expansion of the boundaries for women in politics

and the Democratic Party, and Eleanor was at the forefront of this movement (McGuire, 2014, p. 923). While this article did not address her role as first lady, it did show the large amount of political involvement she had before her time in the White House. This helps understand the fear and anxiety she faced when confronting whether her new role as first lady would replace this part of her identity.

Much of the literature on Roosevelt focused on her relationships with other political women, which provided a backdrop into the role and place for women in politics. Roosevelt was known for her warm personality, and as her conferences demonstrated, she formed close relationships with other women in the political arena. Watts' 2010 article, "Covering Eleanor Roosevelt", examined how Roosevelt's new attitude towards the press during her time as first lady changed the work of the leading women reporters of this time, focusing on the reporter Bess Furman. This article successfully demonstrated what the role of the first lady had previously been, one of a background image who "did not speak or overtly campaign" (p. 45). Watts analyzed how women of high political positions were expected to behave and how Eleanor broke these norms. Regarding the press, she broke a norm with her relationship with the writers because before her White House tenure, "first ladies did not contact reporters" (p. 45).

Another example of a strong relationship between Roosevelt and the press was Roosevelt's relationship with Lorena Hickok. In their 2009 article, "The Public Relations Work of Journalism Trailblazer and First Lady Confidante Lorena Hickok", Martinelli and Bowan attempted to understand the changes and evolution in the public relations world by using Hickok as example (p. 131). This article provided examples of the barriers women faced during this time as women reporters, because women were still confined to "female occupations" (p. 132). Hickok broke these barriers. She worked for the *Minneapolis Tribune* in addition to becoming a

high-ranking member of the *Associated Press* (p. 132) and later one of Eleanor's most trusted confidants (p. 131). The article demonstrated Hickok's influence on Roosevelt because "Hickok taught Eleanor to trust women reporters and to use them in constructing an acceptable public role as First Lady" as well as to write her *My Day* column (p. 133). Like Watts, Martinelli and Bowan showed the shift in the relationship between the White House and the press. Both articles provided background into the groundbreaking nature of Roosevelt's press conferences for female reporters.

Together, the sources regarding Perón and Roosevelt demonstrated how they were perceived in their own countries during their times as first lady and also how history presents and remembers them. The difference in sources contributes to a fascinating comparison. Scholars attempt to find a truth in Perón's unpredictable character and the particularly biased sources. By contrast, less mystery and controversy surround Roosevelt.

Chapter 3 - Eleanor Roosevelt: A Human, a Woman

Eleanor's press conferences, *My Day* column, and autobiographies reveal the issues most important to the former first lady and how she conveyed her beliefs. In particular, she addressed women's role in the Great Depression as well as in the Second World War, a war that was first imminent and then became a reality. She presented herself as woman, highlighting aspects of her female identity throughout her speeches and writings, and she emerged as a political actor and leader. Eleanor became an undeniable force within the Roosevelt presidency, taking on both a public image and a role behind the scenes role to influence policy and political decisions.

Women and Work

Women and their relationship with work appeared throughout Roosevelt's writings and speeches, and this issue was critical to the country's socioeconomic reality. The Great Depression, a theme throughout Eleanor's writings, directly impacted the economy of the United States. The economic struggles heightened the importance but also increased sensitivity around the topic of women's work. For instance, in her 1939 *My Day* column, Eleanor questioned women's roles in and outside the house, and she even described women's work as a privilege (p. 127). Many, including women, contested this opinion, as work was not seen as a privilege but as a necessity. While Roosevelt encouraged women's economic participation outside of the home, she also reinforced and valued many traditional women's roles.

The 1929 stock market crash impacted the lives of countless Americans and people worldwide, changing the political arena to one focused on retaining the basic needs of the country's people. Although Franklin Roosevelt was not yet president during the time of the crash, its economic impacts lasted throughout a large portion of his presidency. Women's role in the economy was in a time of flux and their role in the workforce was consistently questioned. Consumerism became one way of promoting their economic involvement, keeping women in the private, homemaking sphere while also helping the economy. For instance, the *Ladies' Home Journal* encouraged women to end the Great Depression through consumer purchases and by maintaining their current living conditions and lifestyle (Marcellus, 2012, p. 390). The magazine also encouraged women to remain feminine and cheerful (p. 398). Therefore, the editors attempted to keep women in their traditional roles as homemakers while still helping the economy. They argued for more indirect economic and political participation for women as a way for women to keep up a traditional appearance.

Given the country's economic struggles during the Great Depression, many debated the role of women in the US economy. Women's role in the workplace was controversial because many men were seeking employment and often viewed women as taking the available jobs. Backlash over women's workplace gains intensified with male job loss (Marcellus, 2012, p. 398). Two of Eleanor's conferences pointed this out. On October 10, 1938, she addressed the topic of married women working, an increasingly controversial topic because of the Great Depression. She stated to the female reporters, "A great many people would be opposed to having women in industry. Quite a number of people feel that if you took women out of all jobs, there would be plenty of jobs for men and that would solve the unemployment problem" (Beasley, 1983, p. 58). It is not surprising that Eleanor used strong language with the female

reporters, since they were working women themselves, presumably some of them married. On June 3, 1939, in *My Day* she stated that she believed working was the basic right of any human being (p. 127). She portrayed her opinion on women's right to work to a national audience, demonstrating the importance she placed on work and her belief that all men and women should have access to work. Addressing this theme to both women journalists and the general public reinforced its importance and her desire to spread that message.

During Roosevelt's tenure in the White House, married women working was a salient topic, likely fueled by her own high-profile image as a working woman. Eleanor was writing her newspaper column in addition to her job as first lady. Viewing the first lady role as a job was new as well. In 1939, Eleanor stated in *My Day* that she received letters from many people opposing her stand "that married women should be allowed the privilege of working" (p. 127). She continued this thought by stating that many married women do not want to work outside the home because they have enough work to do at home, and therefore "they have no time, no inclination or no ability for any other kind of work" (p. 127). Eleanor acknowledged women's hard work within the home and it was not only the work in public that was important. Later, she also stated in *My Day*, "It seems to me so obvious that married women should not be discriminated against..." (p. 131). Interestingly, in 1945, she confessed in a conference that the "most violent protests came from women themselves" (Beasley, 1983, p. 333). In describing women's relationship with work, Roosevelt used positive and simplified words and expressions. Her *My Day* articles demonstrated a positive image of work, a privilege that should not be taken away if a married woman wants to work. It is interesting that she confessed to women journalists after the Depression had ended that it was women who were the most vehement objectors to her support of married women's work. This demonstrated the close and trusting

relationship she had with these reporters. Likely the Depression had hindered her fight for women's economic reform.

While Eleanor fought for women's right to work outside the home, she consistently demonstrated respect for women's work within the home. In *My Day* on June 16, 1939, she stated that often women had no time for other work besides what they did in the home, using the word *work* to describe their tasks instead of "chores", "duties", or other similar words (p. 127). The use of the word *work* to describe their actions within the house placed a high value on their contributions in the home, a value in line with paid work. She demonstrated an appreciation for women's housework since the beginning of her time as first lady when she proposed an idea to female reporters: "I have a new project for you. I'd like to have some people trained to teach the housekeeper how to set up standards in her home. We should be training people who can be called in by the housewife to set up standards for her household that would be decent and equitable to workers and to her profit as well" (Roosevelt, 1935, p. 32). Therefore, she called for the creation of a paid position that trained women in the jobs of a housewife, reinforcing the importance of the jobs within the home. She proposed this progressive thought to the women at the press conference, as it was perhaps too radical for the *My Day* readers.

In 1944, Eleanor also demonstrated her appreciation for women's work in the home by comparing her own work as first lady to that of housewives. In *My Day* she stated, "I sometimes wonder how the people who are so impressed by my energy can fail to realize that any woman with a family who does all of her own work is doing in the course of a day twice as much as I ever think of doing" (p. 89). Here she used soft language, such as "sometimes" and "wonder", to diminish her own role and power. She stated that her powerful and political role was still less work than that of a housewife. This reinforced her comments from 1941 discussing the

importance of education for women and mothers. In *My Day* she wrote, “I would like to register here my thought that marriage and the upbringing of children in the home require as well-trained a mind as well-disciplined a character as any other occupation that might be considered a career” (p.198). She furthered the parallel between women’s housework and paid work outside the home. However, her soft language kept Eleanor closer to the traditional role for women, despite her more radical thoughts regarding women’s work. By comparing her work as first lady to that of a housewife, she reinforced her perspective on the merit of women’s work in the home.

Roosevelt also addressed her concern regarding the classification of women’s jobs. In a 1944 *My Day* column, Eleanor noticed a difference in the railroad workforce where there was an increase in female workers and she highlighted the fact that there “were many women in slacks” (p. 347). This demonstrated breaking of physical and visual boundaries in the labor force and how women took on more traditionally masculine labor roles. In 1945, the separation between men’s and women’s jobs was still visible because Eleanor commented in *My Day* regarding the job requirements for positions in the Civil Service Commission. These positions specified “men only”, and Roosevelt argued that there would be many women who could fill those positions if it were not for the gender requirement (p. 381). This differed from her 1937 perspective which was more traditional. Specifically, Roosevelt discussed in *My Day* an aspect of design and architecture that would be good for a woman’s skills, which was “visualizing the interior of a room when furniture is placed in it in different arrangements...from the standpoint of the place as being lived in” (p. 77). This showed the common opinion that women were particularly qualified at understanding the functionality of a house and working within that knowledge.

Eleanor had a progressive perspective regarding women and work during her time as first lady, as she valued the contributions of women inside and outside of the home. She did not

argue that one place was right for women, but instead presented ways for women to get involved in the economy. Her views did change slightly during her time in the White House, as she became more vocal for women's economic participation, but she kept the same general theme of women's right to choose what type of work was best for her and her family. Her identity as a working woman funneled into her fight for women's labor rights as she fought for married women's right to work and their value to the country's economy. Roosevelt fought for new roles for women in work, which transferred into the rights of women in the war efforts. Just as women had a role in the economy and job market, they also had a role in the country's other issues, such as World War II.

Women and War

Eleanor's writings and news conferences frequently addressed World War II. She often expressed her desire for women's participation in the war efforts through various means, one of which was their participation in the national defense. This demonstrated her advocacy for roles for women outside the home. War was often, particularly in the early 20th century, considered a masculine area, and Roosevelt advocated for women entering the masculine and public space of war.

The salience of the war made it an important topic for Eleanor because it affected the whole nation. On the night of May 9, 1940, war raged in Europe with the United States still watching on the sidelines. Goodwin (1994) stated, "[Franklin] Roosevelt knew the all-out war he had feared had finally begun" (p. 14). On December 11, 1940, Hitler "delivered a vitriolic speech against Roosevelt and declared war on the United States" and the following day the US Congress unanimously agreed that a state of war existed (pp. 298-299). The war had a dramatic

effect on women's lives and they participated in the war efforts through various means. This ranged from direct participation in war activities to indirect participation through rationing goods and other domestic tasks. The public began debating the place of women in war, industry, and work.

Eleanor Roosevelt supported women's presence in war activities. On September 3, 1941, she stated in *My Day*, "I have wanted women to take their place in national defense long before the government machinery was set up" (p. 216). Similarly, a few days earlier on August 25th, this topic arose in her news conferences. Roosevelt stated that she did not think the government "has provided sufficient means for volunteer participation in defense, especially by women" (Beasley, 1983, p. 217). In October, 1943, she developed this idea in her *My Day* writings, expressing her concern about whether men "are encouraging their wives and daughters to go into the auxiliary military services" (p. 311). Roosevelt went so far as to wonder, "I am not even sure our women are convinced they are needed in these services" (p. 311). These examples demonstrated her desire to see more women contribute to the war efforts and to participate in public life, despite the public reluctance. She expressed this desire to both the public national audience in her *My Day* column and to the female reporters in her conferences. The overlap in themes presented to different audiences demonstrated her confidence in the claim and her desire for a new role for women.

In addition to arguing for new roles for women, Eleanor Roosevelt demonstrated a more tangible plan for involving women in the military with her push for a female voluntary war registration. Although her husband decided against having this registration (Roosevelt, 1942, p. 290), her push for women to formally sign up demonstrated her encouragement of the expansion of the traditional role of women. Still, many people confused her registration with the draft. She

clarified on May 5, 1942, stating in her conference, “[...] many women don’t even want to be registered because in their minds there’s a feeling that being registered means you’ll be drafted” (p. 290). However, the fact that registration paralleled a draft in many ways demonstrated the autonomy she encouraged for women to decide if they wanted to participate in the war efforts. Roosevelt furthered this thought, citing in a conference the importance of women’s contribution to the war. She stated, “I still feel that it would be, to a great many people, a [good] situation to be registered and know that the country knew it could call upon you if it needed you” (p. 290). She saw women as having the ability to contribute to the national welfare and leave the domestic and private sphere.

Eleanor also referred to the less visible role of women’s war efforts, efforts that kept them in more traditional female roles. There were various examples of how women could impact the war while still staying in the home. In 1943, Eleanor wrote in *My Day* regarding the need for women to take charge of their household savings and contribute to the UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Services. She stated, “Almost always it is the women who are the members of the family who have to start to make these savings possible. It must begin immediately, because the results of the savings must be in the hands of the UNRRA as each new area is liberated from our united military effort” (p. 317). Another example of women expanding their traditional roles while staying at home also arose in 1943 when she sent out a call in *My Day* to housewives in the United States. She asked women for the “salvaging of fat for the use of the Government” because of its ability to make “gunpowder, explosives and medicine” (p. 288). While they were not leaving the private traditional space, these women were still able to participate in the war efforts and Eleanor navigated this balance with her calls for women’s participation through more traditional means. These examples demonstrated an

acknowledgement that women were often at home and could contribute to the war efforts from there, but also showed a push for women to transform their traditional roles by volunteering in the war efforts.

The war affected Franklin Roosevelt's policy agenda which also affected Eleanor's ability to make the political change she desired. During World War II, she thought the White House shifted its focus from social issues to focus solely on the war. Goodwin (1994) argued that the focus away from social reform depressed Eleanor (p.81) as her political role had been centered on the country's social issues. The Roosevelt presidency shifted its focus to the war, yet Eleanor found ways to continue her social justice fight through the role of women in wartime participation.

In addition to the policy changes, Roosevelt also felt the burden of war as a mother, creating an emotional connection to the war from which she launched her political battles. In her autobiography she said she connected with other women, stating, "I imagine every mother felt as I did when I said good-by to the children during the war." (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 251). Eleanor used the war to emotionally connect with the country's women, since she herself sent a child to war. She lamented, "During this second war period I identified myself with all the other women who were going through the same slow death, and I kept praying that I might be able to prevent a repetition of the stupidity called war" (p. 251). She created a wartime connection with women of the United States, although the passivity reflected in her autobiography contrasted with the more action-based words of her conferences and *My Day* articles.

Eleanor as a Woman

Eleanor's female identity was woven throughout her writings and conferences, specifically in her attempts to bond with the women of the U.S. Eleanor was initially wary of what she thought the first lady's role entailed but used her private life to her advantage. She bonded with the public on topics such as the economy, women's role during the depression, and her role as a mother. While Eleanor spoke and wrote of various political and public issues, such as the war and economy, which she padded with more feminine and private topics such as family and motherhood.

Eleanor was particularly worried about her role as first lady because of its influence on her private life. She did not bring this up in her public documents, but she revealed this anxiety in her autobiographies. Secondary sources discuss her feelings about her new role. She did not have high expectations for what the role would bring and believed it would confine her (Goodwin, 1994, p. 90). Eleanor based this fear on her perception of the past first ladies of the United States. Prior to Roosevelt, Lou Henry Hoover also entered the role as first lady reluctantly, "but determined to serve as a good example", which she did by encouraging women's political and civil engagement (Mayer, 2011, p. 239). Although Hoover broke precedent by taking an active role in the future president's campaign, during the campaign she spoke little, only giving a few remarks (p. 240). Before Hoover, Grace Coolidge used her warmth to even out the colder persona of her husband (Evalds, 2014, p. 1). Grace was known for her visual media presence. There were more media images of her than of any preceding ladies, but she was never interviewed or quoted, demonstrating the importance of physical appearance for the first lady during this time (p. 1). It was not until after her time as first lady that Grace was interviewed or quoted, and she worked hard to not take an active political stance (p. 3). This was

a starkly different image of a first lady than what Eleanor ended up encompassing, reinforcing the groundbreaking nature of her actions.

When her husband was nominated by the Democratic Party for the presidency, Eleanor worried she would have a role similar to her predecessors. Specifically, she was worried she would be confined to “the superficial, symbolic duties of the first lady” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 90). This makes sense as Hoover and Coolidge did take a less involved approach to political life. Her fear became reality and upon inauguration, she lost her “zest for life” (p. 90). Even Eleanor admitted in her autobiography that she was not thrilled about what she thought were the duties of the first lady and that her husband’s victory was the end of a personal life of her own (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 163). Eleanor broke the traditional mold of the first lady and attempted to connect with readers through her writings. She connected on the topic of family or through economic realities, demonstrating her attempts to break out of the symbolic image of the first lady. She attempted to show to women, and the U.S. in general, that she was more than an image: a human, and a woman.

Roosevelt’s upbringing influenced her ability to see multiple perspectives, despite never having experienced the economic hardships many of her readers faced. Eleanor grew up in an affluent New York family. Her father was Elliott Roosevelt and her mother was Anna Hall (Youngs, 1985, p. 23). Elliott and Anna “were not as wealthy as the Astors or the Vanderbilts, but the blue blood of New York’s ‘best’ families flowed in their veins” (p. 21). Her childhood had challenges and her father struggled from alcoholism until he died in 1894 (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 6). At fifteen, Eleanor sailed the ocean to Allenwood, an “austere” private school in England with French as the language of instruction and communication (Youngs, 1985, p. 59). Eleanor “thrived” in this environment (p. 61). Youngs argued that these aspects of Eleanor’s life made

her youth a time of questioning and living in multiple worlds and “[...] it reflects her youthful wrestling with a perception that would influence her later thinking on life: that people are both marvelously varied and fundamentally similar” (p. 59). Wanting to find this fundamental similarity was visible in her attempts to connect to her readers, whether through economic comparisons or through her role as a mother. Eleanor understood her many roles and how she fit into them, and she used them to her political advantage.

Eleanor used the backdrop of the Great Depression to create empathy with the nation’s women. She related to women through economic vulnerability, although Eleanor’s wealth and income were much higher than that of a majority of the country and her readers. On August 19, 1937, she wrote in *My Day*, “Like almost every other woman I know of moderate means, I am always terribly nervous until all my bills are paid and I know I still have a balance in the bank” (p. 71). It was an exaggeration to call herself a woman of moderate means but Eleanor attempted to diminish her image as a privileged first lady in order to connect economically with the majority of American women. In addition to the Depression, Eleanor used the backdrop of World War II to relate to women. In *My Day*, on January 2, 1943, she wrote, “At the beginning of this new year, I want to say one word to the women of the country, with whom I feel a very special bond. We have the same anxieties and the same sense of frustration very often, because we feel we cannot do enough in the great war effort. I have a very great pride in the spirit of the women of this country” (p. 275). Eleanor wrote of economic and social realities but wrapped them in a package of empathy, emotion, and hope, attempting to relay these messages in a relatable manner.

Eleanor also played up her motherly image, in addition to her role as a woman in politics. On July 10, 1938, she wrote in *My Day* about a party when her grandchildren and Shirley

Temple came to visit the White House. She described the food and activities in detail, taking pure joy in the activities of the day (pp. 92-93). On November 11, 1938, she also wrote in *My Day* about parenting and the need for women to let their children experience life for themselves and make their own mistakes (p. 104). Her family's presence in her newspaper column continued on April 1, 1939, when she described the birth of one of her grandchildren (p. 116). Stories like these were woven throughout Eleanor's writings, demonstrating her desire to let the public know about her personal life. Recounting events in her personal life, she demonstrated more typical female roles and framed her life as a mother first, and then a politically active woman.

Eleanor as a Political Actor

Eleanor's perspective on the role of first lady and of wives of politicians changed throughout the years as she shifted from a more traditional perspective in line with Mrs. Hoover and Mrs. Coolidge to a trailblazing first lady who broke traditional political norms and became a political actor herself. Throughout the years, the first lady encouraged other women's political participation and used a soft tone, always deferring final decisions and political action to her husband, the president. She understood her influence but also respected what decisions were the president's to make.

Eleanor shifted from a more conservative perspective regarding the first lady's role, to one less in line with the traditional early 20th century role. Specifically, in 1913, Roosevelt wrote in her autobiography how she was appalled by some women whose husbands were in politics and who broke the traditional wifely role (p. 75). Yet this was during the time of the presidency of Woodrow Wilson and World War I, and Eleanor admitted to admiring his wife and

her ability to have something to say at each boy's bed when visiting a military hospital (p. 99). Therefore, while she did not appreciate women whom she saw as breaking the norm, she admired a first lady who left the private area of the White House and knew how to connect with constituents, showing a questioning of the role.

Eleanor also shifted ideology regarding her own political involvement and that of other women. Throughout her writings and conferences, Roosevelt encouraged women to get politically involved through various means. In 1933, she emphasized the need for women to pay attention to politics due to the economic depression. She said to the women reporters, "It is an awfully good thing to stress that this is a time when women have a special stake in watching national and international news. Every woman should have a knowledge of what is going on in economic conferences..." (Beasley, 1983, p. 10). Here she advocated for women acquiring economic knowledge because of its ability to make women into important political actors.

Eleanor also encouraged women not to only have political knowledge, but also to know their political worth and abilities. In 1938, she again used the press conferences to address women, urging their political participation and recognition of their own political worth. She stated, "I think perhaps what I would like to say this New Year would be that I hope everywhere women particularly will emphasize the value of the contribution which you can make to the solving of the problems of all nations..." (Roosevelt, 1938, p. 65). With the backdrop of impending war and economic struggles, she encouraged more women to contribute to society but to also know the value of their contribution. Similarly, in 1940, she wrote in *My Day* about the proven importance of women in both the Democratic and Republican political parties. She stated that "the record shows the growing importance of women" (p. 157). Therefore, she

encouraged women to show up and to know the importance of their presence and their contributions. This was a push for women to enter into the public political arena.

Urging women to see other women as political actors was important because Eleanor revealed in a 1938 press conference that women hindered other women's political activism. As seen with women's opposition to married women's right to work, men were not the only opposition to women's political involvement. When campaigning for Caroline O'Day, Roosevelt stated in a conference: "I think the reason why there are so many men in our state legislatures and Congress is not so much that women would be unwilling to run but the fact that women as a whole do not back women's running and do not back them for positions and are not really trying to get them to represent the woman's point of view" (Beasley, 1983, p. 66). Again, Roosevelt revealed these statements to an audience of women and not in her *My Day* articles. This demonstrated her frustration with a lack of women's support for other political women and reinforced her push for women's political participation and solidarity.

It is important to remember that Eleanor was not in an official political position as first lady, yet she took a political role. It was her husband who was elected and she followed into the political world because of their marriage. Goodwin (1994) argued that first Eleanor stood side-by-side with her husband but then she found her political role and was an agitator, putting pressure on her husband to act on certain issues or policies (p. 104). This search for her own identity started earlier in her life, and Goodwin said it was the revelation of her husband's cheating that allowed her "to define a new role for herself beyond her family" (p. 98). It is interesting that her political role was described as something not compatible, or perhaps more important, than a family role. This friction between the two roles was visible in Eleanor's life. Her actions as a political actor contradicted a statement she made in her autobiography: "My

grandmother had taught me that a woman's place was not in the public eye, and that idea clung to me all through the Washington Years" (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 109). While perhaps she thought she stayed out of the public eye because she was not in an official political position and only took an advocacy role behind the scenes, her writings and conferences consistently kept her in the public eye.

Eleanor was not the only political woman during this time, although she was the most prominent in the United States. Isabella Greenway became Arizona's first congresswoman and she and Eleanor had been friends since a young age (Miller, 1999). In 1912, Isabella Ferguson, later Isabella Greenway, started to get involved in politics, during a time when it was still uncommon for women to be in politics (p. 127). In addition to Greenway, Emily Newell Blair also had a large political role in the United States as an advocate for women's issues, although mostly for white women (Anderson, 1997, p.1). Blair was vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee between 1922 and 1928, as well as an opinionated writer and journalist whose opinions "magazine editors eagerly sought" (p. 1). Blair's activism demonstrated the needed balance between political realities, goals, and women's roles. Anderson argued that Blair's "legacy lies in her ability to articulate the distance remaining between political realities and feminist goals for political equality" (p. 1). She also addressed women and participated in the political arena, but kept prominent aspects of her traditional woman's role. Specifically, "Blair addressed a female world, built around active relationships with husbands and children" (p. 4). Roosevelt used many of these same tactics, such as using the political arena to advocate for women's equality and rights. Similar to Blair, she often referred back to her family life while making political statements.

In addition to supporting women's political involvement, Roosevelt also supported women's equality and demonstrated her desire for female equality in various areas of life. In 1937, in *My Day*, she refuted the idea that women could not be as good playwrights as men, writing the edgy statement and question, "...as a rule women know not only what men know, but much more that men will never know. For, how many men really know the heart and soul of a woman?" (p. 50). Here she refuted an idea by a Broadway producer who believed that only men could write good plays, and Roosevelt argued for women's right to be taken seriously and viewed as an equal to men in their talents. Roosevelt also argued for women's economic equality. Specifically, in 1941, she wrote in *My Day* about a proposed tax bill, referencing the time when a woman's earnings were her husband's property and therefore fought to continue monitoring women's rights. She stated, "The battle for the individual rights of women is one of long standing and none of us should countenance anything which undermines it" (p. 214). Here Roosevelt argued for a progressive perspective on women's rights and reminded readers of how far women's rights had progressed while expressing a need to keep moving forward.

Eleanor rarely used extremely strong language when writing about women's political involvement in order to stay away from direct political action. Phrases with "I hope" and similar language diminished her call for women's political participation into a desire and not a demand, as a demand could trespass on her husband's role as president. Roosevelt highlighted this balance in her autobiography. She stated, "I realized that I must not trespass on my husband's prerogatives..., but it seemed to me there were many things in my own activities that might be useful" (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 171). Roosevelt created her own area of political autonomy and agency that was in line with her husband's policies, but she acted separately from her husband. This autonomy grew from her original perspective that "it was a wife's duty to be interested in

whatever interested her husband..." (p. 66). As a political agent, Eleanor crafted her own political niche that kept her in a role with less power than her husband's but with its own political autonomy. While she was not officially in a political office, she was a stronger political actor than her predecessors.

Chapter 4 - Eva Perón: Subordinate yet Demanding

Eva Perón's speeches highlight themes similar to those of Eleanor Roosevelt. She grabbed on to a salient issue in Argentina, national suffrage for women, and used it to politically mobilize women. Eva also successfully tried to relate to women and bond with the Argentine working class. While she shaped a new and powerful political role, Eva presented herself as a woman in many traditional ways, always emphasizing her subordinate status to men, yet her actions were new and demanding.

Women's Suffrage

Eva Perón's discourse on women's political participation centered largely around women's right to vote and her desire for Argentine women to gain this right on a national level. She consistently used strong language in her quest for this political reform and called on women to support her, and more specifically her husband, in order to achieve this right. While Eva used strong language and did encounter resistance, she praised women's traditional gender roles enough to bond with women and to partially veil her political role.

Women's suffrage was a prominent theme throughout the writings and speeches of Eva Perón because of its importance to her husband's future electoral success and its prevalence as a topic in the nation. Eva was a strong advocate for women's suffrage, which was not a national right when Juan Perón was elected as president in 1946. Men gained universal suffrage in 1912 (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 15), but suffrage for Argentine women first emerged on a provincial

level. In the province of San Juan, a 1927 reform to their charter allowed women in San Juan to vote in its provincial elections, a feat accomplished twenty years before Argentine women gained the right to vote in national elections (Hammond, 2009, p. 1). This reform strengthened the case for women's universal suffrage, and in 1947 Eva Perón reignited the battle on a national level (p. 1). It was not an easy fight and opposition remained regarding women's political participation. As seen in San Juan's fight for women's right to vote, backlash came from opponents who feared political participation would make women masculine (p. 2). Opponents targeted not just the act of voting and making a political decision, but the perceived impacts of that decision on traditional gender roles.

In her fight for women's national suffrage, Perón combined traditional female values with a progressive agenda. Hammond (2009) argued that feminists had to show that women's national suffrage could improve society without fundamentally altering it. Ehrick (2015) similarly highlighted the power of women and Perón specifically, combining the traditional and the modern. She argued that the voice of a strong female orator provided significant power and sway, specifically emphasizing the importance of Eva Perón's voice on the radio. She said, "The female radio propagandist was speaking not just for herself or for her cause; her voice had implications for the place of women's voices in the public sphere and women's citizenship generally" (p. 103). She added, "During an era when hearing female voices speaking with such authority and conviction was not at all a regular feature of the soundscape, the combination of radio and the right kind of female orator was a potent sonic cocktail" (p. 105). Perón successfully concocted this "sonic cocktail" and her time as first lady was an example of her use of voice to blend her roles. This demonstrated the importance of the balance between gender

roles in various forms of discourse, whether addressing women in a live speech or through the radio to a more general audience.

Eva used the power of her voice and the saliency of women's national suffrage to mobilize and unite women. This was evident in her radio speech on February 12, 1947, that addressed the women of Argentina. She announced the quest for women's suffrage, which she described as the supreme Constitutional right (Hurst & Roch, 1985, p. 40). She continued, "La mujer puede y debe votar en mi pais" (p. 40), despite women not yet having this right. Here she says the woman can and must vote in Argentina. [Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.] This is seen in other speeches of hers during this time, such as on February 19, when she again addressed women directly about their political rights (p. 50). She repeated this topic again on February 26, March 12, August 30, and September 10, 1947, among others. This demonstrated her desire for constitutional reform and her use of suffrage as a topic to unify and relate to the country's women.

When discussing women's right to vote, Eva used strong language and gave direct action items to her listeners. However, perhaps to soften her language, she combined women's traditional and new political roles, exemplified in her February 26, 1947, radio speech. This speech addressed women directly about the fight for their right to vote. She used powerful language when she said that a woman's right to vote is the most powerful weapon she can have (Hurst & Roch, 1985, p. 55). However, she followed this later by reminding the listener of women's traditional roles. She stated, "La mujer argentina, la responsable de la construcción cristiana de la familia, la mujer argentina, el epígono crítico del hogar..." (p. 56). She said that the woman is the person responsible for creating a Christian family and is the center of the home. She also stated that women will vote in line with those who are concerned about the protection of

the home, the family and the Catholic faith (p.58). Thus, Eva strategically blended two themes: women's political and domestic roles.

Women's Organizations

Women's organizations played an important role in mobilizing Argentinian women into the public sphere, although often still encompassing traditional female roles. Eva created the *Partido Peronista Femenino*, or Peronist Women's Party, a large coalition of women supporting Juan Perón's agenda, whom she often addressed in her speeches. On July 20, 1949, with Eva's speech to 6,000 members of the Peronist party, the Peronist Women's Party began (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 107). This party was important during her time as first lady because she rallied women to bend traditional roles by participating politically, all while referencing Juan Perón as the ultimate power.

Eva Perón demonstrated her desire for women's political participation through the Peronist Women's Party, but with the contingency that this participation must ground itself in loyalty to Juan Perón. In her long and wordy speech on July 26, 1949, Eva addressed the first annual gathering of the Peronist Women's Party. As many of these women already aligned with her political beliefs, her message was strong and pointed but maintained its connection to President Perón. She focused on the unity of the Peronist women, a unity which she said should be their daily goal and most basic preoccupation (Hurst & Roch, 1986, p. 69). However, Eva also referred to her husband. She stated that the organization "tiene su razón determinante esencial en la doctrina de Perón, la posibilidad de realizarse en la obra de Perón y todas las perspectivas de su porvenir reposan sobre la progresiva unidad femenina alrededor de Perón" (Hurst & Roch, 1986, pp. 68-9). Eva Perón said that the Peronist Women's Party must base its

doctrine on that of Juan Perón and the organization must base women's unity around President Perón. The organization revolved around Juan Perón and he remained the patriarch and the powerful figure, with the organization maintaining a subordinate, yet influential, role.

The *Partido Peronista Femenino* demonstrated its relationship with Peronism by rallying women to vote for Juan Perón's reelection. By voting for Perón, women exercised and promoted their political rights but their motives were in support of a man, keeping within acceptable gender boundaries. On January 25, 1951, Eva Perón called for women to work for noble causes but in conjunction with a man. She stated, "...lo recibo en nombre de todas las mujeres argentinas que acompañaron, acompañan o acompañarán siempre a los hombres en las causas nobles..." (Hurst & Roch, 1986, p. 295). Here she urged women to participate in worthy causes but they must accompany the men and not act alone. Submissiveness to men, particularly Juan Perón, was a common theme in February, 1951, when she addressed members of the party to remind them of why they were Peronists and support Juan Perón. On the 21st, Eva announced the Peronist Women's Party's support for Juan Perón, "el único e indiscutible Líder de la nueva Argentina..." (p. 300), the only and undeniable leader of the new Argentina. On February 23 of the same year, she again rallied votes for Perón's re-election and used women and their new rights to help secure the victory (p. 302). This image of a woman accompanied by a man in politics was common. She asked for women to break gender norms through political participation, if supervised by a more powerful man.

During this time period, other women's organizations blended the political and traditional female roles. Tossounian (2013) examined various women's associations in Argentina and argued that while women were the main actors for change and social policy, the organizations maintained a traditional definition of the needs of mothers and children (pp. 321-22). These

philanthropists, mostly of the *Porteño* elite, promoted the ideal of domesticity for women and the “mother-child dyad” (Tossounian, 2013, p. 319). Guy (2009) reinforced this message in her examination of charities in Argentina during this time period. She found themes such as the teaching of domestic skills to women and the “transmission of upper class normative values on mothering” (p. 44). Organizations did much of what Eva Perón demonstrated with the support of women’s political participation while reinforcing certain aspects of gender roles.

Organizations did take a political role despite continuous messaging of many traditional female roles. An example was the *Junta a la Victoria*, which took a more militant approach but still succumbed to many traditional gender roles for women. The *Junta a la Victoria*, or Victory Board, was the largest women’s political group before Perón’s presidency and the Peronist Women’s Party (Deutsch, 2012, pp. 221-2). The group was prominent in Argentina from 1941-1947 and they were a women’s anti-fascist group that emphasized the importance of eliminating fascism abroad and in Argentina, as more authoritarian politics, such as Peronism, were gaining traction (p. 221). The organization tried to have an intersectional perspective, as they “mobilised a spectrum of women and inserted them into the political arena, bridged differences among them, and fostered their engagement” (p. 224). Despite their inclusivity, they fell back on traditional gender roles, like the other women’s organizations of this time, as they used many of these roles to make women feel comfortable (p. 231). The *Junta’s* “emphasis on knitting, healthcare, and children accorded with accepted gender norms” (p. 231). Therefore, it was typical of organizations and people, like Eva Perón, who were pushing for women’s rights in the public sphere, to rely on women’s traditional roles as a buffer to make members and outsiders at ease with any change.

The impact of these organizations was visible in social service charity foundations as well. Tossouninan (2013) examined three charities and despite their traditional values, as seen above, “these associations provided a significant number of social assistance services for mothers, women and children and had a powerful impact on the design of social policy” (p. 299). Similarly, Eva Perón’s *Fundacion Eva Perón*, Eva Perón Foundation, “covered the needs of unprotected women and children through halfway houses and the Casa de la Empleada [Employment House] for women and boarding schools for children” (p. 320). This organization was founded in 1948 when Perón was receiving 12,000 letters a day asking for help, and after her European tour where she saw “what to avoid” in organizations, as the ones she saw were mostly religious and run by the wealthy (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p.117). This organization had political influence, as it had enough size and power to impose “its priorities on the government” (p. 118). Eva’s foundation contrasted many of Argentina’s traditional organizations and its influence solidified her power in the political sphere.

Eva and the Argentine Workers

Eva attempted to rally and unite union labor and lower-class Argentinian workers, drawing from her past and her desire for women’s participation in the workforce. As seen with the Peronist Women’s Party, when addressing labor, Eva referred to Juan Perón, reinforcing the need to support Juan Perón in order to achieve rights for all workers. The socioeconomic and demographic changes in Argentina during this time resulted in heightened sensitivity towards social class. Class was an important topic for Eva Perón and Argentine women because it was a time of change and fluidity in women’s role in labor.

The topic of women and labor, or the women of the working class in general, was visible more often in Eva Perón's speeches after she achieved women's national suffrage. It became a new issue around which to rally supporters and its importance as a topic reflected the lack of protection for women whose role in the economy was still questioned. In 1926, women and men had equality before the law (Hammond, 2009, p. 8), although this legal protection did not always result in equality. Eva acknowledged this vulnerability and used it to connect with working women.

Class and workers' rights remained a prominent issue because of the socioeconomic and demographic changes in Buenos Aires during this time. The early 1900s was a time of wealth and economic growth for Argentina, and the Argentine peso was more valuable than any European currency except the British pound (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 14). The oligarchy had enormous land holdings and during this time of social change became suspicious of the middle class, "whom they suspected of wishing to take their place" (p. 15). By the 1930s, the city of Buenos Aires was a city of immigrants and transients, although by then they were coming from the country's interior and not abroad (p. 12). The population of Buenos Aires grew from almost 3.5 million people in 1936 to over 4.5 million in 1947 (Milanesio, 2010, p. 59). This resulted in citizens' difficulty in identifying people's social class, and dress became a way of class identification, or perhaps disguise (p. 63). In 1943, the oligarchy lost its political domination over Argentina with the coup led by General Arturo Rawson (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, pp. 29-30).

Eva continuously combined her support for women's labor rights with the need to support Juan Perón. On October 14, 1947, she addressed the women of the meat packing plant, *La Negra*. There she promised that Juan Perón would help with all worker conflicts and

promised to visit the plant with him (Hurst & Roch, 1985, p. 135). Similarly, on August 20, 1948, she spoke to workers and stated that Juan wanted to involve women specifically in the labor market. She argued that he was always concerned for women who go to work in factories, and that over time those women had been put on the back burner by politicians (p. 252). She used a forceful tone when she advised women to choose their leaders wisely, saying “que sean leales, que sean idealistas y que quieran la masa trabajadora” (p. 252). Here she told the listeners to choose a leader who is faithful, idealistic, and who cares about the working class, a reference to her husband Juan Perón. Eva combined the idea of supporting Juan Perón with supporting workplace rights.

Other speeches demonstrated the importance of women’s perspectives for the Peronist Party, and Eva continued to combine the need for workers’ rights and recognition with the support of Juan Perón and the Peronist Party. On January 21, 1949, Eva discussed the fight for women’s rights and stated that women have one role, “el de luchar al lado del general Perón por la felicidad de nuestros hogares” (Hurst & Roch, 1986, p. 16). Women’s role was to fight alongside General Perón in order to have happiness in their homes. Again, women’s political participation, even when focused on the working class, connected to the support of Juan Perón. She continued a similar message on March 4, 1949, when she argued that women had one role which was to support Juan Perón (p. 24). Her propensity to address female workers in particular was interesting because it showed that Eva wanted to ensure that women workers knew their rights and their ability to make change. Eva urged women to fight for their rights and to also support Juan Peron. All culminated with the fact that they would be fighting for Perón to make the political changes.

Throughout her messages to the working class and unions, Eva used language that related herself to the workers, or as she affectionately called them, the *descamisados*, or shirtless people. In her speech on January 21, 1949, she referred to herself as one of the women in the battle for rights, and while she told them what to do, she also said she was a part of the struggle (Hurst & Roch, 1986, pp. 16-18). She repeated this point on March 4th when she addressed the working women and said that we all know what our goals are (p. 24). This solidarity normalized their rights but again left the president, a male, in charge of making the actual political and policy decisions.

Eva believed in her ability to relate to the *descamisados* because of her disadvantaged upbringing in rural Argentina. She grew up in Los Toldos, a small village in the Argentine pampas, the countryside (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, pp. 2-3). After her father left her mother, who was his mistress, they moved to a smaller and “humiliating” home (p. 4). Eva knew poverty and the effects of the blatant negative judgement from those around her, and used this to relate to the *descamisados* who came from villages like Los Toldos.

The lower classes formed an important part of Eva’s political base and it was no surprise that she made them a consistent theme throughout her speeches. In addition to the endearing term *descamisados* for the lower classes, another term was *cabecita*, which was the result of a mixture of classist and racist attitudes. The term, sometimes also *cabecita negra*, referring to their black hair, became popular in the 1940s in Argentina and referred to the recent migrant population that moved to Buenos Aires from the provinces (Milanesio, 2010, p. 53). The term was also synonymous with being a Peronist (p. 53).

Throughout Eva Perón’s speeches, topics emerge with the emphasis on class identity, self-determination, and agency for the women of the lower classes. Eva also faced hostility

because of her movement from the lower class to the upper class with her marriage to Juan Perón and because of her self-determination and agency. The importance of dress and image was also a crucial part of Peronism as well as Eva's image and her feminine identity.

Eva as a Woman

Although Eva frequently referred to herself in her speeches, these references often diminished her power and her image as a political and powerful woman. Specifically, on September 8, 1951, Eva referred to herself as a humble woman and portrayed being a woman as a state of being, something that affected her decisions. She said, "Yo no soy más que una humilde mujer argentina y en mi condición de mujer he aceptado en mi persona el homenaje que ustedes han rendido a todas las mujeres argentinas..." (Hurst & Roch, 1986, p. 356). She played up her humble woman status as a way to relate to women but then to also appear less threatening to the men in power. Fraser and Navarro (1996) supported the argument that Eva promoted a humble and submissive image. They said she used phrases like "I am only a woman..." and referred to herself as "a quiet woman, homeloving, fond of the family" when talking to the press (p. 6). Therefore, in many instances she created an image that referred to traditional womanly roles and diminished her power, despite her use of powerful language throughout other parts of her speeches.

Eva portrayed herself as a woman of the pueblo to bond with the *descamisados*, but also to demonstrate that despite her new power and privilege, she has not lost her roots. Eva's image as someone not from Buenos Aires filled her speeches. On November 30, 1947, she referred to herself as a woman of the "pueblo", or the poor countryside (Hurst & Roch, 1985, pp. 22-23).

She also referred to her “ternura de mujer del pueblo,” which was her tenderness as a woman from the country (p. 22). Therefore, she emphasized her emotions and empathy when relating to the *descamisados*. This demonstrated her attempts to balance her role as a powerful woman who left the pueblo and gained unprecedented power in Argentina, while using her status and emotion as a woman to bond and create vulnerability. Another example was on February 26, 1947, when she emphasized her ability to relate to women in general. She stated, “Las preocupaciones de la mujer, yo las vivo, y las asimilo” (p. 55). Here she said that she lives and absorbs the worries of women. Therefore, she took a vulnerable position as a woman and used it on the behalf of women and the *descamisados*.

While she played up her image as a woman, Eva always connected her image to that of her husband. An example was on November 21, 1949, when she spoke in third person. She stated, “Evita ha querido ser el corazón de Perón; Evita ha querido ser la mano femenina que está presente en todos los instantes junto a los trabajadores y en todos los hogares humildes de la Patria” (p. 153). Here she said that she wanted to be the heart of Perón and to be the feminine hand that is always present with the workers and all the humble people of Argentina. She was the feminine image that softened that of her husband, yet she needed to be with him to remain a legitimate political figure.

The image of Eva Perón, which she facilitated and created through these references, was an important aspect of Peronism. Ehrick (2015) stated that Peronism was different from other populist regimes in Latin America because of “the high visual and vocal profile of a woman: Evita Perón” (pp. 104-5). While her marriage propelled her to higher social circles, Eva had already made an image for herself before becoming first lady. By 1943, she was making five to six thousand pesos per month, “which made her one of the best-paid radio actresses of that time”

(Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 27). Fraser and Navarro also commented on the power of her physical image. They stated, “Her pale complexion, her blonde hair, and the fairy tale of her marriage made her an arresting figure” (p. 72). Her continuous references to her own image support Ehrick’s argument in that she had a strong visual and vocal identity. Perón used her speeches to show Argentina and the world that she was a powerful woman, but ultimately a woman who was submissive to her husband, the president. She also used her physical image and story to attract attention, which will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Juan Perón also broke norms and used his masculinity to attract voters, which helped create the image of the Peronist Party. Milanesio (2014) examined the “many masculine identities” that aided in shaping Juan Perón’s public persona (p. 85). She referred to his image as “Argentina’s First Sportsman”, which she argued demonstrated his physical prowess and virility, perhaps contributing to his other nickname as the “Criollo superman” (pp. 89-91). Fraser and Navarro (1996) also highlighted the importance of masculinity in Argentine politics, and they described Juan Perón as “a masculine man in a country where there was a cult of masculinity” (p. 34). Similarly, Masiello (1992) argued that conservative intellectuals in Argentina were seen as highly masculine, “and with a vision of the appropriately subordinate place of women in society” (p. 142). This reinforced the prevalent separation between male and female roles and identities.

This contrast of masculine and feminine images helped the Peróns because it was not only Eva who reinforced yet simultaneously bent gender norms; Juan did as well. As Milanesio, and Fraser and Navarro demonstrated, he played up the masculine image because of its ability to create a strong and important visual for Peronism and Argentina. In contrast, Eva’s speeches demonstrated her attempts to create a softer image, despite her strong words. Eva’s attempts to show humility contrasted the image that Juan projected. However, both did break norms. Juan

did so by letting Eva live with him before marriage, and allowing her to participate in political meetings (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 55). It was not only Eva acting in new or controversial ways, but her husband did as well and supported her groundbreaking actions as first lady.

Eva as a Political Actor

These examples demonstrate Eva's perception of herself as first lady and a political actor: feminine with political influence. She first saw herself as a champion for women's national suffrage and uniting Peronist women, and later increased her focus on the Argentine blue-collar workers, all the while weaving her identity as a woman throughout her speeches. The political themes and the abundance of the speeches themselves demonstrated her trailblazing role as a political actor, despite not holding an official political office. She demonstrated a high level of agency in her decisions to fight for policies such as universal suffrage and workers' rights. Her place in the public arena addressing the country was a new phenomenon, one outside of the traditionally private female space. However, her consistent references to her female humility, emotion, and kindness attempted to soften the impact of her new role to those who would question it.

Eva's portrayal of herself as a mediator in her speeches demonstrated a blending of her new role with traditional feminine images. She often emphasized her role as a bridge between the people she was speaking to and the government, or Juan Perón. On April 4, 1947, she addressed the women of Mendoza, Argentina, and said that she stretches out her arm to them (Hust and Roch, 1985, p. 76), again demonstrating an act of reaching or creating a bridge to unite. Similarly, on November 27, 1950, she said she was a bridge between the workers and Perón (Hurst & Roch, 1986, p. 270). These references to mediation demonstrated the blending

of gender roles and how she saw her role as a first lady. The bridge created opportunity for new ideas, new policies, and most importantly support, but she left the role of political decisions to the government and her husband.

Fraser and Navarro (1996) reinforced this argument in their description of Eva's image and actions as the Argentine first lady. During the presidential campaign, Eva stood beside Juan Perón, something no candidate's wife had done before (p. 72). This demonstrated the importance of her place and image in a political and public sphere. She was also often questioned about her clothes, although it is likely that she would have been questioned no matter what she wore because she was in a new and political space. Fraser and Navarro argued that Eva, even as first lady, continued to dress as a film star but "there were no rules for what women should wear in a political context, since there were no precedents for what Evita was doing" (p. 81). Yrigoyen, re-elected to president in 1928 until the 1930 coup that displaced him from office, never married (Davis, 1947, pp. 278-282). No woman in Argentine history created the image or had power as first lady like Perón.

Chapter 5 - The Value of Comparison

Comparing Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón illustrates their commonalities across continents and reveals their different methods for achieving similar goals. They fought for similar issues as both women rallied a female base, supported the working and middle classes, and often talked about labor, particularly women and work. However, their presentation of the issues varied drastically. Roosevelt, never known for her beauty, employed a more intellectual approach, whereas Perón continued her role as a glamorous actress while in the Argentine *Casa Rosada*.

How they presented their issues and themselves sets Roosevelt and Perón apart. Eva Perón's presentation made her more groundbreaking than Roosevelt. Specifically, both women argued for new roles for women, but Perón used stronger language and drew on her dramatic past to create a world of Peronism around her image which helped rally support for her ideas. Roosevelt had a strong presence and political support, and she projected an image of herself as a warm mother, which was based on her personality, instead of an image based on her physical appearance. Therefore, she did not inspire the popular movement that Perón did, as Perón combined both the intellectual and the visual forms of persuasion. Perón focused on salient political issues around which to garner support, but she also emphasized her physical appearance, which attracted supporters and disgusted others. While their images differed, both

women emphasized their roles as literal and figurative mothers, aiding their ability to work as women within the political sphere.

Political Agendas

Roosevelt and Perón focused on relevant social issues to unite women. Both women chose groundbreaking and salient topics, but Perón pushed harder for her beliefs. Perón argued for new legislation and more direct ways for women to become involved politically and otherwise in the public sphere. While Roosevelt did address new and important issues, she used more cautious and less fiery and direct language than did Perón. Their political agendas demonstrated a desire for women to leave the private sphere and participate in the traditionally masculine areas of public life, such as war and politics. They both saw an area in which women were excluded, whether that was the war efforts or women's suffrage, and used it as a rallying point for women's participation.

A prominent issue during Roosevelt's tenure as first lady was World War II, an event that she used to relate to women based on its unique impact on them and the increased interest in women's wartime participation. Women initially lacked the ability to participate in this politically relevant and impactful event, which Roosevelt used to rally support. She argued for women's voluntary registration for war service and for them to contribute to the war in more domestic ways, such as saving cooking fat and money. Roosevelt used the war as a bonding tool around which to garner support because it was an inescapable reality for Americans.

When advocating for women's wartime participation, Roosevelt's language was soft, although her message strong, and she referred to her role as a mother who had children leave for

war. On May 5, 1942, she explained her desire for the registry and her use of “still” and “feel” demonstrated a softening of her conviction. Although never successful in achieving this goal, she stated, “I still feel that it would be, to a great many people, a [good] situation to be registered...” (Roosevelt, 1942, p. 290). She also referred to her role as a mother sending her children off to the war, writing in her autobiography, “I identified myself with all the other women who were going through the same slow death...” (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 251). Her role as a mother came up frequently in her discussions, creating a relatable but also softened image that again separated her from the masculine political role and brought her back to a maternal and female role.

Similar to women’s exclusion from wartime involvement in the United States, in Argentina, women could not participate in elections at the national level and Perón used this to unite women. She used suffrage to bond with women and, importantly, to gain Peronist support. She also created the Peronist Women’s Party to mobilize women in a political arena. Suffrage was a salient issue and Perón used forceful language to convey the importance of women’s political participation and their right to vote.

The language Perón used was more direct than Roosevelt’s, reinforcing her groundbreaking role. Her speeches demonstrated this strong language, such as when she said that women should and must vote in her country (Hurst & Roch, 1947, p. 40). Here her language was direct and forcefully told other women what to do. Also, on February 26, 1947, she stated that women’s suffrage carries a weight of responsibility and a sacred promise (56). Therefore, she demonstrated the value of suffrage and how women were capable and deserving of this right. This helped her rally women and other supporters because she used strong language, but she also made a stronger break from the traditional female and first lady role.

Women's Work

Roosevelt and Perón also worked for increased rights and participation for women in the labor force. Both women connected with the working classes as a foundation of their support. Roosevelt, a working mother and woman herself, argued for working women's right to work after marriage and urged respect for women's work within the home. Perón focused more on supporting labor and union rights, and connected herself with the working-class employees because of her disadvantaged upbringing. Both women used their country's socioeconomic context to make change and rally support. Roosevelt's arguments were in the context of the Great Depression, while Perón spoke at a time of heightened sensitivity towards class in Argentina. While the topics were similar, Perón's language and message were again stronger than Roosevelt's.

Roosevelt used the backdrop of the Great Depression to argue for women's economic equality. People related to the Great Depression because of its wide impact. It also spurred questions regarding the role of women in the workforce and who had the right to work. Roosevelt argued that married women should have the right to work, and work was a privilege. She also made progressive statements regarding the value of women's work within the home. In *My Day* on June 16, 1939, Roosevelt described this housework as work, not chores or tasks, and the value placed on this work was equal to that in paid positions outside of the home (p. 122). Roosevelt related to the women as a working woman herself, but she could not extricate herself from her upper-class status. She kept a slight separateness from these women compared to Perón, who identified wholeheartedly with the women she addressed. Although Roosevelt

demonstrated a strong affinity towards and understanding of working women, her soft-spoken language did not demonstrate as strong of a fight for rights as did Perón.

Eva Perón did not have as strong a unifying event, such as the Great Depression, but Argentina was in a time of unrest and questioning regarding social classes. While important, this was not as salient as the economic turmoil in the United States during the Roosevelt presidency, and thus her fight for rights was even more groundbreaking because of this lack of a major impetus. Whereas Roosevelt focused on women's right to work, Perón focused on women's rights within the workforce and unions. Roosevelt also related to working women as a working wife and a mother, and Perón, not a mother herself, related to working women as a *descamisado*.

Perón fought for the rights of women already in the labor force and used her past as a bonding mechanism with these women. Whereas Roosevelt addressed women who did and did not need to work, Perón addressed women in working class positions who relied financially on their jobs, and threw herself into the fight for their rights. She related to the *descamisados* and passionately exclaimed that their fight was also her fight. Eva Perón used women and work to maintain and gain support, and rallied the working class because of the socioeconomic changes in Argentina. Perón used her acting skills with her raw passion to recruit support for her husband, with the ultimate goal of improving conditions for the working classes. Roosevelt did not use work to gain political support for her husband, but rather to advance women's labor rights and mobilize women.

Self-Representation

Roosevelt and Perón worked with their husbands to advance their political agendas, but Perón consistently presented her ideas in tandem with her husband and as a mechanism to garner more political support, to an extent not seen with Roosevelt. Their husbands were important in

the presentation of their issues, as both women took a role next to or behind their husbands while simultaneously transforming their own role as first lady. As seen in their policy issues, they acknowledged that their personal power was because of their husband's more powerful political position. Eva consistently made sure what she said was attributed back to her husband, while simultaneously creating a strong public image with her forceful language. Eleanor took the role of an advocate behind the scenes influencing her husband, but she did not repeatedly credit her husband, as did Perón. Therefore, both women transformed their roles without stepping significantly out of bounds of the more traditional role. Yet, both were also criticized for their involvement in their husband's politics, reinforcing the notion that they did break a gender norm.

Roosevelt transformed the role of first lady through her policy issues and her role as an advocate by influencing the decisions of her husband. She took a political and active role but remained behind the scenes, thus transforming her role in a more secretive and diminutive manner. Lash (1984) argued that Roosevelt accepted that this involvement would result in "inevitable" criticism, and "she proceeded to transform the first lady's role into a unique force for good" (p. 57). The criticism demonstrated that she went beyond the precedent set by the previous first ladies, breaking the traditional first lady role in the United States.

Perón transformed the role of first lady through her policy issues and her extensive involvement within the political sphere. Not having a prominent and recent predecessor to compare herself to, she trailblazed her own role. Even before becoming first lady, Eva participated in political discussions with her husband and the military, incurring the ire of some military officers (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 54). As a woman and someone without an elected or official political title, she entered the political sphere with the men. She also stood by her husband during his campaign for presidency, a first in Argentina (p. 72), which put her in the

political and public spotlight. This showed a transformation of the role of first lady, pushing its boundaries from private into the public.

While Roosevelt and Perón transformed their roles as first lady, they both deferred a large portion of political decisions and opinions to their husbands. Roosevelt's opinions were formed before becoming first lady and were based on the opinions of her husband. Although as first lady, she had constructed her own opinions and she presented and fought for her beliefs because by then they were her own. Perón, on the other hand, was vocal in her support for her husband and consistently connected her political agenda to that of her husband.

Roosevelt admitted that her husband influenced many of her political beliefs before her days as first lady because that was the proper role of a woman. She stated, "It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband..." (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 66). Specifically, she was not always interested in women's suffrage or feminism but became a suffragist because her husband was for women's suffrage and therefore she thought she should be as well (p. 68). However, once she became first lady she did not frequently refer to her husband in her speeches and addressed the women of the press conferences as an independent political actor. While she supported her husband's presidency, she presented issues as an independent person and unlike Perón, did not present issues primarily to gain support for her husband.

On the other hand, Eva Perón consistently presented her issues as a continuation of Juan Perón's political agenda and everything she did was because of her husband's political career. Her frequent references to her husband and her lack of independence separated her from Roosevelt's independent *My Day* columns and news conferences. While her thoughts were not as independent as Roosevelt's, her manner of communication and presentation remained more groundbreaking and powerful.

Their Public Image

Presentation was critical in gathering and retaining political support for both first ladies and their husbands. The two women depicted themselves in starkly different manners to present their image of the first lady. Eleanor presented herself in a more professionalized role of first lady, with a less feminine appearance compared to her predecessors and Eva Perón. On the other hand, Eva portrayed a sexualized and glamorous image to create a support base and to play the role of first lady. They differed in image, yet both had similar support bases in part because of the images they portrayed.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a part of the upper class but her allies belonged to the lower and middle classes. As we see in the analysis of her conferences and writings, she related herself to the working class despite her upbringing in a wealthy New York family. She never left the upper ranks of society, and therefore she straddled the line between two socioeconomic worlds. She presented herself as a woman from wealth who simultaneously understood and experienced the challenges of working women.

While Roosevelt grew up with wealth and opportunity, Perón grew up in an impoverished city and lifestyle but crossed into wealth and fame with the role of first lady. Yet, she retained the support of the *descamisados*. She referred to herself as one of them, someone who also experienced their pain. Perón presented the issues with a high level of empathy, and because of this, she connected emotionally with the audience. Therefore, despite her rise to wealth and fame as Argentine first lady, she retained a close connection to her upbringing and used it to gain support.

Their upbringings were critical in both women's self-created image, an image that helped them pursue their political ideas. Roosevelt focused on her role as a mother, nurturing a warm bond with Americans, and did not focus on her physical appearance to the extent that Eva Perón did. Roosevelt played down her appearance and sexuality, whereas Perón emphasized this aspect of her identity. For Perón, her physical appearance continued with her legacy, and the vast literature on the topic reinforces its continued importance. Her often controversial appearance was a major point of reference for her detractors and simultaneously a way to gain and maintain support among the *descamisados*.

Eleanor Roosevelt was not known for her looks and did not display high levels of feminine sexuality in her dress. Eleanor did not see herself as especially beautiful. In her autobiography she described herself, saying, "I had prominent front teeth, not a very good mouth and chin" (Roosevelt, 1961, p. 66). Despite her self-deprecating vision, her clothing did change, although this was not a focus of Roosevelt's during her time as first lady. Specifically, "in 1934 the nation's dress designers chose her as 'the best dressed woman in the United States,' a title that Eleanor said was the 'funniest' and 'grandest' of accolades". (Lash, 1984, pp. 65-66). Roosevelt's reaction demonstrated her self-deprecation and how she did not take her appearance too seriously. It also displayed her lack of focus on her attire and physical image, and instead a focus on her political image.

Roosevelt used the first lady position as a motherly role to the nation and demonstrated a warm and nurturing personality. In her writings, Roosevelt emphasized her role as a mother to her children and translated this image into a mother for the country. She felt the pain of the women whose children fought in the war; she knew what it was like to be a mother and talked fondly of her children. Her references towards her own children illustrated her desire, or

obligation, to let the country know about her private feminine life, in addition to her political public life.

Whereas Roosevelt did not focus heavily on her outward appearance, Eva Perón put much effort into her physical image. Perón dressed in expensive and luxurious clothing, aware of the role of fashion in politics, arguing that poor people wanted to look up to someone beautiful (Fraser & Navarro, 1996, p. 82). Her dress illustrated her role as an actress and created a new image for the first lady. As Ehrick (2015) pointed out, the Peronist movement projected a strong visual image because of Eva Perón. Photos demonstrate the Argentine first lady dressed as royalty in lavish ball gowns, furs, jewels and with styled dyed hair. Page (1996) described her choice in wardrobe as having “a childlike ostentation in dress and accessories” (p. 12). The visual image of opulence and success, plus her past as an actress, helped Perón bond with people based on her past and her new image, a new image of aspiration and change from the past.

She also portrayed a more sexual image of herself than did Roosevelt. Myths surrounded Perón’s image, particularly that of a whore. This myth continues to haunt her name. Perón’s past as an actress trying to climb the acting hierarchy of Buenos Aires and the resulting rumors of prostitution, became an easy target for the anti-Peronists who claimed she used her sexuality to attain her power. Taylor (1979) addressed the use of her sexuality as a tool against her:

But to the anti-Peronist mind, Eva Perón’s appearance suggests, far from physical or spiritual purity, her sexuality. Her enemies dwell on the Eva of the years preceding her husband’s assumption of power and her first three years as First Lady. Not only did she display her more flamboyant toilettes during this period, but at the same time Eva verged on a plumpness that anti-Peronists view as evidence of her voluptuousness (p. 89).

Eva struggled to rid herself of her sexual image, but continued to adorn herself in ways that ruffled feathers of anti-Peronists. The incident of her bare shoulder is often cited as an example of her dress breaking traditional first lady boundaries in Argentina. Specifically, “When the

young, street-smart, totally instinctive Evita became her country's First Lady, she brought to the role a disarming, often ingenious freshness and a style that some would find tasteless. At one of the inaugural banquets she wore a gray silk gown that left one of her shoulders bare" (Page, 1996, p. 11). This scandalous dress of a bare shoulder ignited the fury of upper-class Argentines (p. 11).

Like Roosevelt, Perón took on a motherly role by bonding with the *descamisados*, something she could do based on her past and her vows to take care of their needs. She created an image of a motherly figure, even though, unlike Roosevelt, she had no children of her own. Eva's support for a variety of projects and her frequent reference to herself as a *descamisado* depicted a sense of familiarity. Taylor (1979) argued that one of the myths surrounding Perón was Eva the Mother; second to her love for Juan Perón was her "love for the common people of her country" (p. 92). Peronism had a strong focus on motherhood and its "descriptions of Eva as the perfect mother place great importance within the role of motherhood on the duties of a woman as a teacher and protector of her children" (p. 92). Eva and Peronism played up the importance of a motherly images and Eva's ability to take on that role.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Eleanor Roosevelt and Eva Perón redefined the role of first lady in the United States and in Argentina. They both broke gender norms and expectations while maintaining many elements of traditional womanhood. Their ability to strategically maneuver between both the public and the private sphere brought political power and influence. They stepped outside the private sphere enough to influence their countries through political persuasion, but much of this persuasion was done with a layer of femininity. Roosevelt often referred to elements of the private sphere, such as family and her role as a mother, and used these elements to communicate her political messages. Perón also communicated in a manner that downplayed her political power and always made sure that the ultimate political authority was not herself, but was her husband. Through their nuanced and smart communication, they became two of the most influential political figures in the United States and Argentina.

Analyzing both Roosevelt and Perón individually portrays them as vastly different women who happened to be first ladies during a similar time period in two distinct countries. Through a comparison, one uncovers how they used many of the same principles to influence similar populations in their respective countries. Both Roosevelt and Perón used salient issues that affected a large portion of their populations to garner support. The Great Depression was an issue that affected Americans during Roosevelt's time in the White House and was an effective topic around which Roosevelt related to the American people. Similarly, Perón rallied around the fight for women's suffrage but did not have as impactful event around which to mobilize.

Therefore, they both rallied support around political issues and used their unprecedented power to create a new and more political image of the first lady.

Perón broke gender norms and expectations more than Roosevelt because of how she communicated her messages. Perón's language sets her apart because of the strength and ferocity with which she delivered her messages. Whereas Roosevelt used softer language to communicate her progressive thoughts, Perón stepped farther out of the traditional first lady's shadow and used forceful and often demanding language to communicate to the people, particularly women, in her speeches. She did not ask but told people what to do, creating more power and influence for herself. That is not to say Roosevelt did not influence her listeners, as she was very influential during her time. However, her softer language kept her in the slightly more traditional sphere.

The deliberate and forceful delivery is interesting because, despite Perón's stronger language, the messages kept her subordinate to her husband. While she communicated action steps for the listeners, everything she did and said was still because of and for Juan Perón. She displayed herself as an independent political actor but would take a step back and remind the listeners that she needed to be this independent political actor because of the Peronist message and the need for more Peronist support. Despite her referrals back to her husband, the fact that she called for direct and forceful action in her speeches was new and demonstrated a groundbreaking role as first lady.

More research could be done to expand this analysis to other women in newer positions of political power. In more contemporary studies in the United States, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama are examples in how they created new roles for themselves as first ladies based on their political and personal interests. Similarly, Julia Gillard, Australia's first female Prime

Minister, although not first lady, also faced many controversies largely because of her gender. There are many examples of women taking roles that historically had been reserved for men, whether de facto or de jure. These women continue to create new opportunities for future women in politics and were important in demonstrating women's ability to influence politics.

Roosevelt and Perón were influential and controversial, and they both redefined the role of the first lady. What adds to their mystique is that they remain influential and controversial. Roosevelt influenced countless policies and actions after her husband's death, which continue to influence modern society. Although controversy around Roosevelt has subsided, for Perón this is not the case. Perón has influenced Argentine leaders and the populist political style, and she is still a controversial person in Argentina and around the globe. A consensus regarding Perón's motives and actions will never be found, as her controversy permeates the writings of scholars and everyday observers. Despite the controversy, both Roosevelt and Perón created new pathways and opportunities for women because of their influence during their tenures as first lady.

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