

Family Values and The Political Image of The Biden Family

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CC 221: Global Political Communication

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April 24, 2024

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Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1942 to working-class parents living with his maternal grandparents. They later moved to Delaware, where Biden graduated from the University of Delaware with a double major in political science and history. Biden ran for Senate in 1972, but shortly after his election in Delaware, his wife Neilia and one-year-old daughter Naomi were killed in an automobile accident. His sons Beau (3) and Hunter (2) were taken to the hospital with minor injuries. Biden stayed there while his sons recovered from their injuries, and was sworn into the Senate from the hospital (Levingston 2023). He married Jill Tracy Jacobs in 1977, and their daughter Ashley was born in 1981. Between both sons, Biden has 7 grandchildren ranging from 29 years old to 4 years old. Tragedy continued in the Biden Family, with Beau Biden passing away at age 46 from glioblastoma in 2015 (Levingston, 2023). Biden is not shy about speaking about the difficulties his family has overcome and defending his children and grandchildren publicly. He does not operate within the stereotype of the typical American family, facing loss, multiple marriages, and children by different women. Despite this, President Biden has not shied away from involving his family and his position as a father and a husband in his politics.

When looking at the “Political Image” of the Biden Family, we must know its true meaning and how it affects modern-day politics. We define Political Image as the carefully constructed perception of a political candidate or campaign, this is crucial as it shapes our public perception and trust, influences our voter behavior and outcomes, and impacts their credibility and legitimacy. In a study conducted on images, politicians, and social media: patterns and effects of politicians’ image-based political communication strategies on social media, we see how visuals and political images have embedded themselves into our daily lives. While images

have always been part of politics, the spread of these political images has recently gained momentum and visibility to all voters through use of social media-based political communication (Farkas, 2020) When considering the “Political Image” of the Biden family, it is important to recognize its broader influence on modern-day politics, as this image not only represents his values, policies, and visions but also extends to the personal character and family dynamics, which can further impact their appeal and reliability to voters. Optics is another key component of the Political Portrayal of Political Image, as it is how the public perceives a specific person, event, action, or decision. Optics play a crucial role in the Biden family image as they shape public perceptions of their family life, values, and relationships, directly influencing how President Biden’s overall image is perceived. This impacts our ability to connect and trust these politicians through authentic displays of vulnerability and behind-the-scenes moments that can humanize a family and evoke emotion and strengthen public support. The Biden Family’s political image is a complex yet impactful aspect of modern-day politics that combines personal and familial history with public perceptions, by presenting authentic family dynamics and experiences, the Bidens offer a humanized image of their lives that resonates with some and is scrutinized by others ultimately informing how President Biden is perceived, impacting his credibility and overall political appeals in many ways.

The concept of “family values,” as it is used in politics, originates from the idea of familism. The National Library of Medicine in a study titled “Familism and Psychological Health: The Intervening Role of Closeness and Social Support,” defines familism as a cultural value that emphasizes warm, close, supportive family relationships and that family is prioritized over self (Campos et al. 2014, pg 1). Familism places an emphasis on families being responsible for taking care of their members and is against government or welfare intervention. However,

this value has been changed entirely by its adoption into the modern conservative lexicon as a referendum against abortion, birth control, feminism, pornography, comprehensive sex education, divorce, homosexuality, as well as secularism and atheism (Powell 2006, pg 10). This concept is characterized by the stereotypical American Nuclear Family, a Christian heterosexual couple, with 2-3 children. This couple got married before they had any children and worked 9-5 jobs. Family values in this context, mean only one type of family, and it is a specific mold not available to most Americans.

“Family Values” Politics is a relatively modern phenomenon, beginning in the Reagan administration with the rise of the religious right and groups like “Moral Majority” (Lumen-SUNY, pg 1). He weaponized traditionality and used rhetoric to attack policies like the Equal Rights Amendment for women, asking voters to vote on conservative lines to protect America against immorality and decline. In an article from The Journal of Cultural Economy, author Megan Wood describes the emergence of “The New Democrats in 1985” This group was morally conservative and “obsessed with the decline of marriage, rising rates of illegitimate childbearing, and the resultant epidemic of fatherless families” (Wood, 2017). This marks the beginning of family issues and the image and makeup of the American family entering the cultural/political zeitgeist. This tradition of regressive nostalgia has continued into the 21st century and has created space for conservatives to disguise legislation that is against families that do not fit the perfect mold as understood through “Family Values.” In her thesis titled “The Political Use of Family Values” from Georgia State University, Caroline Powell writes that, “The [family values] rhetoric becomes a powerful force that can be influential in the passage of legislation affecting non-traditional families, or those that do not adhere to the nuclear family ideal” (Powell, 2006, pg 4) Viewing this phenomenon through a political communication lens, In

2022, the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act was passed, which on its face sounds like a reasonable, innocent proposal that supports families. However, this bill is used to limit and attack LGBTQ+ voices in Florida, ban books, and restrict the freedoms of teachers in classrooms. While this bill was introduced in the state of Florida, it quickly became a main tenet of the "Culture War" entering the national conversation. President Biden addresses this law, saying, "We need to push back against the hundreds of callous and cynical bills and laws introduced in states targeting transgender children, terrifying families, and criminalizing doctors and nurses," (Herszenhorn, 2023). He appeals to "family values" in a way that is completely against the goals of the original law, demonstrating how this bill is hurting families, and that the conservative standard of "family values" is reductive and cannot fit into the norms of a country so large and diverse.

President Joe Biden fits into several of the standards established in the previous paragraph. He is a catholic with several children and grandchildren. However, he has been married twice and has children from different marriages. His children, most notably his son Hunter, have acted in ways that damage this reputation. President Biden uses the concept of family values in a completely different way. He uses his position as a father and the importance of family in his life to emphasize unity and empathy in this country. He often speaks about his personal experiences and uses the series of tragedies and hardships he has faced to show the American people that even The President does not have the perfect life and family. However, Biden does not only support his image with his own experiences. His policy platform is designed to support all kinds of families in America, and he has publicly supported things like renewing the Child Tax Credit (Shutt, 2024), which provides financial assistance to families with children, as well as investing in childcare and early childhood education. Biden uses the ethos provided to

him by his own experiences as a father to position himself as a family man without the negative connotations afforded by the conservative corruption of “family values” politics.

President Biden is not shy to stick up for his family when they are attacked in the press, thinking beyond the political implications of doing so, and furthering his image as a good father and a family man. When Hunter Biden was charged in a case relating to tax evasion and unlawful purchase of a firearm, Biden’s response was, “I trust him. I have faith in him. And it impacts my presidency by making me feel proud of him”(Hultzer, 2023). Even when his family acts in ways that are damaging to his campaign and his image as President, Biden remains supportive and models the ways that families support each other. This is able to resonate with voters who prioritize family values and see Biden as a caring and supportive father.

The consequences of Hunter Biden’s personal decisions, particularly his infidelity, have deeply affected the Biden Family's Political Image and Joe Biden’s Public Perception. While Hunter Biden’s infidelity has been under scrutiny and media attention for several years, the most notable instance known to the media and public was in 2019 when a relationship with a woman named Lunden Roberts was released to the public. This relationship ended up leading to a very public paternity lawsuit in May of 2019, when Roberts filed a paternity suit against Hunter Biden in Arkansas, proclaiming that Biden was the father of her child. This attracted widespread media attention, and although initially, Hunter Biden denied the allegations and the paternity claim, it was found out through DNA testing that he was the biological father of Roberts's child. This lawsuit presented a very complex situation for the Biden Family as it threatened their already carefully cultivated “family-oriented” public image even though they do not operate under the traditional “family values” due to the blended nature of the family. Throughout Hunter Biden’s legal proceedings, the Biden family maintained a low profile and Joe Biden refrained from

making public statements about the matter and instead focused on his presidential campaign. However, the lack of response from the Biden family fueled criticism from the media and political opponents. Many argued that their silence portrayed a lack of accountability, transparency, and honesty, especially considering Joe Biden's emphasis on unity, integrity, and family values during his campaign. The timing of these events was very challenging for the Biden campaign as the handling of Hunter Biden's scandals raised questions about Joe Biden's leadership and judgment as our future president. Throughout the rest of the campaign and the continued attacks on the Biden Family and their values, Joe Biden's image and presidential campaign prevailed as he was elected to become the forty-sixth President of the United States in November 2020.

What's so interesting about the Biden Family image and their campaign run in the 2020 Presidential Election is how important Family Values and the image of Family Values are in Politics. This is particularly important for an election win, especially with the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election. Although this scandal occurred during the height of Biden's 2020 Presidential campaign, and ultimately he was able to win, we saw how prevalent the attacks were from the Media and critics who believed this deemed Biden incapable of serving. President Biden, who has deemed himself a family-oriented and family values-centered politician, has gone through much loss and tragedy in his familial life. When Biden lost his first wife and their one-year-old daughter tragically, leaving their sons Hunter and Beau Biden critically injured, it changed Biden forever. In the Journey of Psychohistory, 'A Psychobiographical and Psycho-Political Investigation of Biden and Trump in Troubled Times' The theme of Love and Loss is thoroughly examined throughout President Biden's Political Career and Life; it is stated that "Biden, newly elected to the Senate at age 29, was devastated; "suicide, wasn't just an option

to him, but a rational option." Yet looking at his sons sleeping in their hospital beds left him knowing that "I had no choice but to fight to stay alive." Despite the enormous rage he felt at his loss, his life "collapsed into their needs." (Elovitz, 2020) While this moment marked one of the most difficult and tragic periods in Joe Biden's life, it also served as a catalyst for shaping him into the family-oriented and individual he is today. While Biden remained hesitant and silent to make remarks on his son's infidelity and legal battles, in an exclusive interview with People Magazine in July of 2023 he expressed support towards his son and for the first time acknowledged his grand-daughter, stating that "Our son Hunter and Navy's mother, Lunden, are working together to foster a relationship that is in the best interests of their daughter, preserving her privacy as much as possible going forward," President Biden and the White House made sure to note that thousands of other families have faced similar circumstances and "At the center is a 4-year-old girl and everyone wants what is best for her, including all of her grandparents." While this might be to finally acknowledge his granddaughter who has been at the forefront of media for the past four years, it also should be noted that this reflects a strategic shift in his approach towards addressing family matters in the public sphere, especially amidst the upcoming 2024 election.

The use of family image in politics can be tricky. Children can be too young to be exposed to the media, and especially in national elections, can be exploited through the press invading their privacy. However, this image can be an extremely effective tool when humanizing a candidate. George Washington University Professor and campaign expert, Ron Faucheux asserts, "When you do see the families and kids in the campaign, I think oftentimes it's done because the campaign feels like the candidate needs to sell a human side, a family values side, personal warmth" (Siegelbaum, 2012). The use of family makes a politician relatable, humanizes

a figure that can seem larger than life, and demonstrates ways in which they are similar to their constituency. Images of children, particularly on social media, are used as a campaign power play. Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, often posts pictures of his young children doing homework in his office, and occasionally sitting in his seat in the Canadian cabinet (Ullrich, 2017). He creates the sense that he is a working parent, and like many of his voters, he too faces the challenge of balancing work and family. However, children of politicians are not as primed for the spotlight as candidates are which can cause issues on the campaign trail. These children are not politicians, and their actions as regular people can easily become detrimental to the image of their parent(s). The case of Hunter Biden, which we discussed earlier is an example of how quickly the tide can turn in the political image of a family. The scandals that Hunter Biden was involved in have attached themselves to President Biden's image and campaign, transferring the distrust from his son's scandals onto him.

In the most recent 2020 Presidential Election and in the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election we see an interesting comparison between the political family image both Donald Trump and Joe Biden have had during these election cycles. In 2020, the Trump family was utilized by playing a visible role in his reelection bid, frequently appearing at rallies, events, news programs, and social media platforms, and taking roles in policy areas. Observing the active and hands-on role Donald Trump's children played in their father's campaign for re-election is interesting to see, as the idea of family values was heavily emphasized, appealing to those who value traditional family roles and conservative values despite Trump's very non-traditional familial choices. While his children's active engagement bolstered Trump's appeal toward his traditional American family values image and belief messaging among his supporters, it also attracted criticism in the media due to conflicts of interest during

investigations of financial misconduct involved with his children. While Biden was facing scrutiny over his son Hunter's business dealings and infidelity, among other scandals, his campaign widely focused on his image alone as a devoted family man who has endured personal tragedy. Many campaigns and interviews took place with his grandchildren to further emphasize his relatability and family-values-focused image. Despite Trump's attempts to weaponize Hunter's scandals against Biden, these controversies had a limited effect on Biden's overall appeal to voters. Now in 2024, while Hunter Biden's personal issues have not been a central focus of Republican attacks recently, Biden's recent support and loyalty towards his son and family further contribute to his message as a devoted family man and president, which is in hopes of strengthening his connection with voters across the country.

The American family is not something that can be defined. The conservative standard of "family values" is no longer a reasonable or applicable mold to the diverse combinations of systems that make up the 131.43 million households in the United States (Korhonen, 2023). This idea and tradition are deeply embedded in American conservatism, and Republican politicians continue to push narratives and write legislation that further this mold, even though it does not apply to a majority of Americans. Due to this, President Biden is able to adopt a family-oriented image without the illusion of harmony and perfection. He represents the contemporary American family, tragedy, scandals, and all. In embracing his son, despite the various issues that have raised problems for both his campaign and presidency, he positions himself as an empathetic and caring father, and by proxy, an empathetic and caring president. The scandals impacted Biden's campaign and public image but also allowed him to show his human side. Biden's election run in 2020 emphasized the critical role image and optics play in politics, yet despite the criticism, he emerged victorious. As we shift our focus to the upcoming 2024 election and beyond, the

evolution of the Biden Family image remains a compelling part of Biden's Presidential run and narrative. Joe Biden's unwavering commitment to stand and support his son while recently acknowledging his grandchild serves as both a strategic shift to further resonate with American families, humanize his image, and establish a greater sense of relatability, connection, and responsibility with voters. As we look ahead to the post-2024 Presidential Campaign, we will see how this election will further influence the family image and its electoral outcomes. The Presidential re-match of Joe Biden and Donald Trump will further emphasize the importance of these roles, as four years later we will see how family narratives, values, and ideologies evolve and can change, hinder, and affect voter outcomes and perceptions. The unfolding narrative of this election promises to display the future of optics and family image in politics and offers insights into how the American Political image will redefine itself in the future.

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