



Melania Trump

Melania Trump (born **Melanija Knavs**;^[a] April 26, 1970) is a Slovenian-American former fashion model who served as the first lady of the United States from 2017 to 2021 as the wife of former president Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States. She is the first naturalized citizen to become first lady and the second foreign-born first lady after Louisa Adams.

Melanija Knavs was born in Slovenia (then part of Yugoslavia) where she began working as a fashion model at the age of 16. She changed the spelling of her name to Melania Knauss, and she traveled to Milan and Paris to seek modeling work until she met Paolo Zampolli, who hired her and sponsored her immigration to the United States in 1996. She continued working as a model in Manhattan, where Zampolli introduced her to the real estate developer Donald Trump in 1998.

They began dating, and she began adjusting to a more lavish lifestyle. He worked to get her more modeling jobs, and she supported him during his 2000 presidential campaign. Melania and Donald Trump married in 2005, and they had a son, Barron Trump, the following year. She dedicated most of her time to Barron during his infancy, spending less time working or accompanying her husband at events. She started her own jewelry brand, Melania, in 2009.

After encouraging Donald to run for president in the 2016 presidential election, Melania only made rare campaign appearances, opting to help Donald strategize over the phone. She received major press coverage during the campaign when erotic photos from her modeling years were uncovered and published, and again when a speech she gave at the 2016 Republican National Convention was found to be plagiarized from a similar speech by Michelle Obama. In the month leading up to the election, she responded to the Access Hollywood tape that had caused a scandal for her husband.

Trump stayed in Manhattan for the first months of her tenure as first lady, allowing Barron to finish school and Melania to negotiate her prenuptial agreement. Her stepdaughter Ivanka Trump fulfilled some of the first lady's traditional duties,

Melania Trump



Official portrait, 2017

First Lady of the United States

In role

January 20, 2017 – January 20, 2021

President Donald Trump

Preceded by Michelle Obama

Succeeded by Jill Biden

Personal details

Born Melanija Knavs
April 26, 1970
Novo Mesto, SR
Slovenia, SFR
Yugoslavia

Citizenship Yugoslavia (1970–1991)
Slovenia (1991–present)
United States (2006–present)


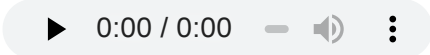
Spouse Donald Trump (m. 2005)

Children Barron Trump

Parent(s) Amalija Ulčnik
Viktor Knavs

causing a rivalry between the two. She kept to minimal activity after moving into the White House, often staying in the residence instead of her office in the East Wing, and she held fewer events than previous first ladies. 2018 saw several challenges for Melania, including allegations of extramarital affairs by her husband, surgery for kidney disease, and a tour of Africa that was overshadowed by scandals.

During her tenure as first lady, Trump prioritized children's issues, launching the Be Best campaign to promote children's welfare and making many visits to children's hospitals. She opposed her husband's family separation policy and convinced him to end the practice. She was a close advisor to her husband. In the final months of her tenure, Trump endorsed her husband's false claims of election fraud in the 2020 presidential election, and has largely stayed out of public view since leaving the White House.

Residence	<u>Mar-a-Lago</u>
Signature	
Melania Trump's voice	
	
Trump on her family's departure from the White House Recorded January 18, 2021	

Early life and education

Melanija Knavs was born in Novo Mesto, Yugoslavia, now part of present-day Slovenia, on April 26, 1970.^{[1][2]} Her father Viktor Knavs first worked as a chauffeur, and he eventually sold car parts for a state-owned vehicle manufacturer as he made connections with the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the national communist party.^[3] Her mother Amalija worked as a patternmaker at the children's clothing manufacturer Jutranjka in Sevnica.^{[1][4]} In Sevnica, the family lived in the state-run housing complex Naselje Heroja Maroka.^[5] She has an older sister, Ines,^[6] and an older half-brother from her father's previous relationship, Denis Cigeljnjak, whom she reportedly has never met.^[7] Her father denied paternity of the boy, even after it was confirmed by a paternity test.

Although Knauss's father was a member of Yugoslavia's communist party, which espoused a policy of state atheism,^[8] he had his daughters secretly baptized as Catholic, as was common.^{[9][10]} The family was well-off relative to most who lived in communist societies. They frequently went on vacations to other parts of Europe.^[11] Their apartment was decorated with brightly colored walls, which was a major departure from other apartments in the country.^{[11][7]}

As a child, Knavs and other children of workers at the factory participated in fashion shows that featured children's clothing.^{[12][4][13]} Textiles were Sevnica's primary industry. Students were excused from school to participate in the shows.^[14] From a young age, Knavs expressed an interest in fashion, and she began customizing and sewing her own clothes.^[5] She developed a skill for it by watching her mother work.^[15] Knavs did well in school, where she was appointed school treasurer.^[16]

When Knavs was a teenager, she moved to a two-story house in Sevnica with her family.^[17] From her youth in Slovenia, Knavs was influenced by the United States: she described the presidency of Ronald Reagan as the beginning of a new era in her own country and the debut of CNN International in 1985 gave her family access to American media.^[18] At the age of fifteen, Knavs moved to Ljubljana to attend the Secondary School for Design and Photography, attending the school until her graduation at nineteen.^[19] She made the long commute from her hometown to the capital and back each day by train.^[20] After her first

year, Melanija and Ines moved to the capital together.^[21] After graduating, Knava enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture and Civil and Geodetic Engineering at the University of Ljubljana to further study design, leaving after a few months without taking her degree.^{[19][22]}

Early modeling career

European career

Knava was discovered by Slovenian fashion photographer Stane Jerko when she was sixteen, after modeling in a school-sponsored show.^{[23][24]} At the time, she had wanted to be a fashion designer rather than a model.^[11] Knava won a modeling contest with the Italian studio Cinecittà that entitled her to a movie role, but she rejected the prize after a producer sexually propositioned her.^[25] As her modeling career progressed, Knava took on an alternate spelling of her name, Melania Knauss. She traveled Europe to find modeling work.^{[19][26]} Except a few close relatives, she did not maintain contact with anyone she knew in Slovenia.^[27] In 1992, Knauss was named runner-up in the *Jana Magazine* Look of the Year contest, which promised its top three contestants an international modeling contract.^{[1][19][11]} She signed with RVR Reclame in Milan, but she left the organization a few months later.^[28]

Knauss spent the following years traveling Europe for modeling jobs, including one in which she portrayed the first female president of the United States in 1993.^[29] Around age 23 or 24, she made Paris her primary residence, where she lived with her roommate Victoria Silvstedt.^[30] Knauss modeled for fashion houses in Paris and Milan, where in 1995 she met Metropolitan Models co-owner Paolo Zampolli, a friend of her future husband Donald Trump, who was on a scouting trip in Europe.^[13] Zampolli became one of the few people who was involved in Knauss's life for a long time.^[31]

Relocating to New York

Zampolli urged Knauss to travel to the United States, where he said he would like to represent her.^[13] In 1996, Knauss moved to Manhattan.^{[13][11]} By this time, she was already 26 years old, much older than most aspiring models.^[32] Zampolli encouraged Knauss to live near and socialize with people in the fashion industry,^[33] and he arranged for her to share an apartment with photographer Matthew Atanian in Zeckendorf Towers in Union Square.^{[34][13]} Her rent was taken from her pay with Zampolli's agency.^[35] Once she arrived in the United States, she returned to her home country only sparingly and only for short periods of time.^[36] She lived a healthy lifestyle, managing her diet carefully,^[37] and she avoided the drinking and partying that often consumed the lives of the models around her.^[38] She did not lead an active social life and only went out on rare occasions.^{[38][37]} Knauss was featured in a sexually explicit photo shoot for a 1997 issue of *Max*, a French men's magazine, with another female model. The photos were shot by the photographer Alexandre Ale de Basseville, and the work was unpaid, instead promising Knauss exposure in a prominent magazine. The photos were largely forgotten until they were published by the *New York Post* in 2016.^[39]

For her first weeks in the United States, her travel visa did not allow her to work in the country. Despite this, she accepted ten modeling jobs that earned her approximately \$20,000. She then received an H-1B visa that allowed her to work.^[33] She received her first major gig when she posed for a Camel cigarette ad shot by Ellen von Unwerth, which was displayed as a Times Square billboard and ran in *Rolling Stone*. The

opportunity came about from a law that required cigarette ads only feature individuals above the age of 25, which excluded most aspiring models.^[40] When her roommate Atanian left New York, Knauss moved to an apartment off of Park Avenue.^[41]

Marriage and family

Meeting Donald Trump

In September 1998, Zampolli introduced Knauss to the real estate mogul Donald Trump at a party.^[42] Trump had a date to the event, Celina Midelfart. When he asked Knauss for her phone number, she refused. Instead, she insisted that he give her his own number. He passed her test when he gave her multiple personal numbers instead of an office number.^{[43][44]} She later said that giving her own number would make her "just one of the women he calls".^[43] The exact details of when and where this took place are unclear, though the Kit Kat Club is often described as where they met.^[45]

After a week, Knauss called Trump and they went on a date.^[46] She intentionally gave him an indifferent attitude to his advances, knowing this would pique his interest.^[47] Not only was Trump's personality similar to that of Knauss's father,^{[12][48][49]} but they were of similar ages and had similar physical appearances.^{[11][48][50]} When they began dating, Knauss had access to his book *Trump: The Art of the Comeback*, in which he detailed what he wanted from a relationship.^{[51][52]}

Knauss held a press conference on September 8, spending the event recounting her successes and telling reporters that she was "world famous", "among the top 50" highest paid models in the world, and set to appear in a movie alongside Mickey Rourke.^[53] The intention was to build her profile in anticipation of another, ultimately unsuccessful, cigarette ad campaign.^[54] This was unusual behavior for a woman who typically kept a quiet and professional presence,^[55] and reporters were unable to verify the claims she made.^[56] The Trumps have stated that they met at the New York Fashion Week shortly after this conference, though others in the industry have said rumors about their relationship had already developed by then.^[55] Their relationship initially only lasted a few weeks. Knauss left Trump after she saw his ex-girlfriend Kara Young leaving Trump Tower, but Knauss and Trump reunited the following week.^[57]

Relationship with Donald Trump

Dating Trump brought several benefits for Knauss. His fame and connections gave her new career opportunities, and at the time he had a reputation for being more respectful to the women he associated with relative to other men who mingled with supermodels.^[58] Knauss experienced such a benefit that October when she had the opportunity to meet the Kennedys at a gala—their mother Jacqueline Kennedy, who had died shortly before, had been deeply admired by Knauss and her mother.^[59] She encountered many other world famous celebrities while attending events with Trump.^[60]



Donald Trump and Melania Knauss in 1999

Knauss continued her modeling career after meeting Donald Trump,^[13] though she took fewer jobs as time went on and she dedicated more time to him.^[61] In 1999, the couple gained attention after an interview with shock jock Howard Stern on his show, in which he asked them lewd sexual questions.^[62] Trump often brought Knauss to meetings to show her off, praising her beauty. He did not let her participate in the business, citing the conflict he had with his first wife after giving her an executive role.^[63]

Trump announced his candidacy for the Reform Party presidential nomination on October 7, 1999. Knauss adamantly supported the move.^[64] When asked by The New York Times what her role would be if Trump were to become president, Knauss replied: "I would be very traditional, like Betty Ford or Jackie Kennedy".^[65] Knauss saw extensive media attention as tabloids considered the idea of a model as first lady.^[66]

Knauss was one of the first models recruited to Trump's modeling agency, Trump Model Management, after its creation in February 1999. The following months, she appeared in several magazines and advertisements organized by individuals close to Trump.^[67]

While Trump was organizing his campaign, Knauss appeared the February Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. The image featured her in a bikini alongside a large inflatable whale, and the shoot was run by Antoine Verglas, an associate of Zampolli's.^[68] Shortly after the shoot, Verglas called Knauss back for another project where he had her pose nude in a Bond girl aesthetic.^[69] Trump had lobbied for her inclusion in a GQ spread,^[70] and her relationship with Trump allowed the shoot access to Trump's Boeing 727. Images from the shoot were featured in the January edition of GQ magazine.^[69] At the time, Trump's involvement was not made known.^[33] She then appeared in another sexualized photo shoot where she was posted in a mock up of the Oval Office.^[71]

In January 2000, news broke that Knauss and Trump broke up, with conflicting accounts of who ended the relationship. Many photos and publicity pieces the two had done together were quickly edited before publication to accommodate the change.^[72] They kept in contact, and they reunited a few months later.^[73] Knauss received her green card in 2001, granting her permanent residency in the United States.^{[33][1]} Knauss and Trump moved in together at Trump Tower in 2002.^[74] She made her first appearance on Trump's game show The Apprentice in April 2004 when an episode had the contestants visit their penthouse.^[75]

Engagement and wedding

Trump proposed to Knauss on April 26, 2004, on her birthday as they were leaving to attend the Met Gala.^[76] He reasoned that he was more willing to wed as she had not insisted on marriage, and he felt she was an influence in the success he had seen over the previous years.^[77] Knauss was more compatible with Trump than his previous wives, as she did not have the ambition of his first wife and did not cause public drama like his second wife. Knauss fulfilled his desire for a wife who was self-confident but supported him silently.^[78] She also signed his prenuptial agreement without issue.^[79] A few months before the wedding, Knauss traveled to Paris with Anna Wintour and André Leon Talley to find a wedding dress, and Knauss decided on a dress by John Galliano.^[80] In the days leading up to the wedding, she appeared on the front cover of Vogue in her dress.^{[81][82]}



Melania Knauss with Kylie Bax, Trump, and then-president Bill Clinton in 2000

Trump and Knauss married on January 22, 2005, at the Bethesda-by-the-Sea church in Palm Beach, Florida.^[83] The ceremony was followed by a reception in the ballroom at Donald's Mar-a-Lago estate, which Melania planned with Preston Bailey.^[84] Numerous celebrities were present, including musicians, athletes, media executives, and television personalities.^[85] She had one bridesmaid, her sister Ines, who had moved to New York so they could be closer together.^[36] Knauss arranged all of the details of the wedding with her planner. She let Trump make decisions about the event, but she refused his suggestion that the wedding be broadcast on NBC.^[86]

Marriage and motherhood

The Trumps had three residences that they traveled between: Trump Tower in New York, Trump National Golf Club Bedminster in New Jersey, and Mar-a-Lago in Florida.^{[36][87]} To have her own private abode, Melania had a private spa constructed on the top floor of Trump Tower.^[87] As a couple, the two did not spend much direct time together, preferring to live adjacently with one another.^[88] According to Trump, their passive relationship suited him because he worked for a living and didn't "want to go home and work at a relationship".^{[11][89]} Melania accepted a transaction element in their relationship, though she cared about Donald and did not believe that she was a gold digger.^[90] When she attended events with her husband at Trump facilities, she often stayed for only a few minutes to make an appearance before returning to the private residence.^[91] Donald did not learn to speak Melania's native language, which she said she accepted because she is "not a nagging wife".^[1]



Melania and Donald Trump in 2006

Upon marrying Donald, Melania became stepmother to his four children: Donald Trump Jr., Eric Trump and Ivanka Trump from his first marriage to Ivana Zelníčková, and Tiffany Trump from his second marriage to Marla Maples.^[92] Melania had especially bonded with Tiffany, who was six when Melania began dating Tiffany's father, and made sure she felt included among her step-siblings.^[93] When Melania herself became pregnant, it was widely covered in the media.^[94] This included her second appearance on the cover of *Vogue*, featuring her pregnant body in a bikini and an open coat.^[95] Melania spent the months with her sister, who had moved to New York, and her parents, who visited throughout the pregnancy. She also oversaw the construction of a nursery in Trump Tower.^[96] She had a baby shower at the FAO Schwarz toy store, but she insisted that the toys and gifts she received be donated to a children's hospital.^[97]

On March 20, 2006, Donald and Melania had a son, Barron William Trump.^[98] Melania chose her son's middle name, while Donald chose his first name.^[99] Donald had previously used the name Barron as a pseudonym for when he posed as his own public relations agent.^[100] After Barron was born, Melania was active in his life and accordingly spent less time attending events with her husband.^{[101][102]} Donald had made it clear to her that if they had a child, he would not be actively involved in the child's life.^[102] Melania later said she approved of this, stating that she "didn't want him changing diapers or putting Barron to bed".^[11] She avoided the use of nannies, with a few exceptions in Barron's earliest years, insisting on raising him herself.^[103] This lessened social activity meant that Donald began courting supermodels again, which made Melania uncomfortable, though she did not know about the women who later alleged that they had extramarital affairs with him.^[104]

Melania stayed out of the public spotlight after she settled into her life as a Trump, excepting occasional charity work and an appearance in an Aflac commercial.^[105] She became a citizen of the United States on July 28, 2006.^[106] She then sponsored her parents using the "chain migration" immigration process that her husband later repeatedly criticized.^{[107][108]} Besides her American citizenship, both she and her son maintain dual citizenship in Slovenia.^[109] Spending most of her time at Trump residences, she rarely kept companions besides her parents and her son.^[91] When she was with her husband, they watched films together, including their favorite films *Gone with the Wind* and *Sunset Boulevard*.^[110]

Business ventures

As her son reached childhood, Melania found herself with more time for other pursuits.^[111] She trademarked her name, Melania, in 2009 as a jewelry brand, which she used to sell less expensive jewelry pieces on QVC.^[112] She was intentional about not using the Trump name in her branding, correcting reporters who called it Melania Trump.^[113] She drew the designs herself,^[11] which were based on three places where she had lived: New York, Palm Beach, and Paris. Over the following years, she released additional *Melania* collections, and they sold out each time.^[113]



Melania Trump in 2011

Melania then introduced a line of caviar-infused skincare products under the brand Melania Marks Skincare in 2011.^[114] The brand never launched. It brought about a legal case when the company selling the products, New Sunshine, underwent management changes and voided the contract. The company alleged that one executive had given a sweetheart deal to the Trumps because he was a family friend. The case was decided in Trump's favor, and the amount to be paid to her was settled out of court.^[115] She had initially sued the company for \$50 million in lost revenue.^[116] Rededicating herself to parenting, Melania eventually ended the production of her jewelry brand.^[116]

Donald Trump 2016 presidential campaign

Personal life during the campaign

Melania was the one who finally convinced Donald to campaign for president in the 2016 presidential election, telling him that he either needed to do it or stop talking about it.^{[117][118]} When the campaign began, Melania made it clear to her husband that she would not be pressured into campaigning or attending events, and that she would only make appearances when she wanted to. She subsequently played a relatively small role in the campaign, which had been atypical of spouses of presidential candidates since the early 20th century.^[119] Explaining her absence, she cited the need to stay home with her son Barron.^{[120][121]} Her daily routine was nonetheless altered by the campaign, as she had to take security arrangements into account when she traveled, and she could not post about her activities online in real time.^[122] Once a prolific user of Instagram and Twitter, she became less active on her social media accounts when the campaign began.^[11]

While many people doubted Donald's chances at the presidency, including his own inner circle, Melania believed he would win.^{[123][124]} Unlike Donald's advisors, Melania encouraged him to follow his instincts and say what he felt he should say, with the exception that she does not like his use of profane language.^[125] She analyzed the campaign closely from home, following polling and watching how her husband interacted with his opponents.^[126] She spoke to him on the phone regularly throughout the campaign, including a conversation after each rally in which she gave a candid evaluation of how he did.^[127]

Campaign involvement

Melania Trump's career as a model was an advantage during the campaign, as she was prepared for photographers and did not need to hire a fashion consultant.^[19] As a model, she was required to be deliberate in all of her movement, including how she stood and walked.^[128] She resented being called shy during the campaign, saying that this was an impression spread by people who only briefly met her and wanted their "15 minutes of fame".^[129] Melania's earliest speaking appearances in November 2015 and February 2016 were prompted by Donald calling on her to speak to the crowd. Both times, she only said a few sentences.^[130] Her first scheduled speech during the campaign did not take place until April 2016.^[121]



Melania at a campaign event with Donald and Barron in November 2015

The campaign longed to get Melania more active, as she was in a unique position to humanize Donald and to appeal to the American Dream from an immigrant's perspective.^[131] Hope Hicks was the campaign's main liaison with Melania, facilitating any appearances that she wished to make. Melania trusted Hicks's judgement and allowed her to weigh the importance of a given appearance.^[132] Her rare appearances brought her to swing states where her husband needed extra support, and her speeches celebrated his personal traits instead of policy.^[120]

Melania Trump was involved in the vice presidential selection process, meeting with the top contenders, and her approval of Mike Pence contributed to his selection. The deciding factor, in her mind, was that Pence was not as ambitious as the other contenders and would not seek to undermine Donald.^[133] She did not get along as well with Pence's wife, Karen Pence, with whom she had little in common.^[134]

Media coverage

An attack ad against the Trumps was produced by super PAC that supported Donald's opponent Ted Cruz featuring Melania's nude GQ photo with the caption "Meet Melania Trump. Your next first lady. Or you could support Ted Cruz on Tuesday", intensifying the rivalry between the two candidates in the 2016 Republican Party presidential primaries.^{[120][135][11]} More scandalous nude images of Melania were published on the front page of the New York Post in July 2016 in a story titled "The Ogle Office". The images did not have a major effect on the campaign, as Melania was seen as the victim, but they were humiliating and she spent the following two months away from the public.^[136]

On July 18, 2016, Melania Trump gave a speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention. A controversy emerged after it became apparent that a paragraph of the speech had been plagiarized from Michelle Obama's speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention.^{[137][138]} When asked about it, Melania said she wrote the speech herself "with as little help as possible".^[139] No one in the Trump campaign had previewed the speech, when political campaigns typically have several people scrutinize such a speech.^[140] Donald was furious with his staff and felt he had failed Melania, while Melania took the gaffe personally and felt she had failed the campaign.^[141] It was the only major speech she delivered during the campaign.^[142] Two days later, Trump staff writer Meredith McIver took responsibility, saying there was a misunderstanding when Melania read passages of Obama's speech as examples.^{[137][143]} The speech also included a rare statement on her past, describing her family in Slovenia and her early modeling career.^[140] After giving the speech, Melania stayed out of public view until election day approached.^[144]



Melania Trump in 2016

Access Hollywood tape

On October 7, a month before the election, the Access Hollywood tape was leaked. The tape had been recorded in 2005, shortly after their marriage, and it featured audio of Donald making controversial remarks about his treatment of women. Immediately after its release, the campaign's primary concern was Melania's reaction. An anonymous person who was with Donald when the news broke reported that "red was coming up his neck to his ears". It took him two hours before he went to see Melania. Upon their meeting, Melania reportedly told him "Now you could lose, you could have blown this for us", and then left the room after he apologized.^[145] In 2024, her husband's former personal counsel Michael Cohen testified during *The People of the State of New York v. Donald J. Trump* trial that Donald Trump had privately credited her as having suggested the campaign's response strategy of characterizing the conversation on the tape as "locker room talk".^[146]

Melania kept her distance from him, angry that he may have ended his candidacy with his comments, and she waited a day before making a comment.^[147] When asked by the campaign to make a scripted appearance alongside Donald as damage control, she refused, deciding that she was going to respond her own way.^[148] She also refused to sit beside him during his recorded apology as politicians' spouses often did in these situations.^[149] Melania released a statement saying that the tape did not show "the man I know" and said those who accused him of sexual misconduct are liars.^[137] Melania received significantly more attention from the press following the incident,^[150] and she was frustrated by the pity she received.^[148] A few days later, she attended a presidential debate wearing a pussy bow, causing widespread speculation about her intention (as her husband's comments on the Access Hollywood tape had included,

"grab them by the pussy"—with pussy being slang for vagina).^{[151][150]} After she voted, Melania spent most of election day with her parents in Trump Tower while the rest of the family did last minute campaigning.^[152]

First lady of the United States (2017–2021)

First lady in Manhattan

The inauguration of Donald Trump took place on January 20, 2017.^[153] After her husband was elected president, she announced that she would not move to Washington, D.C. with him, instead staying in Manhattan so Barron could finish the school year there.^[154] This also allowed her to introduce him to the White House gradually so as not to overwhelm him.^[155] During this time, Melania negotiated new terms for her prenuptial agreement with Donald to reflect the changes in their lives since it was signed and to ensure that Barron received a suitable inheritance.^[156]

Melania Trump was the second foreign-born woman to hold the title of first lady after Louisa Adams, who was born in England,^[153] and Melania was the first naturalized citizen to hold the title.^[157] Trump has said that she can speak English, Italian, French, and German in addition to her native Slovene, but she has only been heard speaking English and Slovene fluently. When communicating with speakers of other languages, she makes use of a translator.^[158] She was also the first Catholic to live in the White House since President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline and was the second Catholic first lady of the United States.^{[159][160]}

The first lady's absence caused speculation that her stepdaughter Ivanka would serve as an acting first lady.^{[154][161][162]} This was part of a larger rivalry that developed between the two as they both engaged in activity typically in the first lady's purview. After Ivanka organized a screening of *Finding Dory* in the White House, Melania required that they needed permission before entering the residential area of the building.^[163] As time went by, the administration's staff grew unhappy with Melania's absence, as it gave the impression of marital issues and prevented her from exercising a calming influence over the president.^{[164][165]} She also stoked resentment among the people in New York, who predominantly opposed the Trumps, because of the costs and traffic issues caused by the Secret Service presence.^{[166][167]} The Secret Service itself also faced logistical issues from the repeated travel to New York. Having a Secret Service detail was not a major adjustment for Melania though, as she had spent years around her husband's security team.^[168] She was given the Secret Service code name "Muse" to go along with the president's name "Mogul".^[169] Being first lady came with another drawback for Melania, as she was expected to speak on serious topics such as immigration policy and had little control over how her media appearances were handled, which was a different experience than she had as a model.^[170]

When the Trump administration's White House website was posted, Melania's biographical information caused controversy because it listed her jewelry business. Though it had already ceased operation, critics alleged that it was an attempt to promote her business with government resources.^[171] Another allegation of attempting to profit from her role as first lady came up in February, when she sued the *Daily Mail* for libel



With Donald, Liberty Ball, January 20, 2017

after it alleged in 2016 that she had worked for an escort agency.^[172] The suit was initially for lost career opportunities, but this was changed to emotional distress when she received questions about why she expected to have career opportunities as first lady.^[173]

On March 8, 2017, Trump hosted her first White House event, a luncheon for International Women's Day. She spoke to an audience of women about her life as a female immigrant and about working towards gender equality both domestically and abroad, noting the role of education as a tool against gender inequality.^{[174][175]} The

Trumps visited Vatican City in May 2017. As Melania was visiting as a Catholic, Pope Francis blessed her rosary beads, and she placed flowers at the feet of a statue of the Madonna at the Vatican's Bambino Gesù children's hospital.^[176]

The first major public attention Melania received was after an incident in May 2017 while the Trumps were visiting Israel. Donald had forgotten that Melania was by his side when he was walking with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and she fell behind from the group. Humiliated, she slapped away his hand when he reached out behind him to grab hers. This was the first time press coverage of Melania took notice of an independent streak.^{[177][178]}

East Wing staff

The lack of staff appointments in the East Wing during the first months of the Trump administration—typically the domain of the first lady—caused a backlog of tour requests to develop. In February several hires were made for the Office of the First Lady: Anna Cristina Niceta Lloyd as social secretary, Lindsay Reynolds as the first lady's chief of staff, Tham Kannalikhham as her decorator, Stephanie Winston Wolkoff as the first lady's assistant, and Stephanie Grisham as communications director.^[179] Melania retained the head florist appointed by Michelle Obama, Hedieh Ghaffarian.^[180] The chief usher appointed under the Obama administration, Angella Reid, was replaced by Trump International Hotel employee Timothy Harleth, breaking the norm of the chief usher serving under multiple presidencies.^[179] Reid had been unpopular with the staff, and the firing earned Melania their goodwill.^[181]

The first lady's staff remained small relative to those of her predecessors.^[179] This was in part because she did not want to have any employees speaking on her behalf. Instead, she answered her correspondences herself.^[182] Melania had a reputation in the White House for being "drama-free",^[183] and for treating the staff well.^[184] According to her husband's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, her staff had "100 percent loyalty to her".^[185] Melania had a close, trusting relationship with her staff, and she was protective of them when conflict arose.^[186] Before moving in, Melania worked with Kannalikhham to redecorate the White House, as first ladies typically do. She had most of the Obama-era decor replaced, and like the Obamas, the Trumps paid for it out of pocket instead of using the allotted funding.^[187]

Life in the White House

Trump and her son, Barron, moved into the White House on June 11, 2017.^[188] Like they had throughout their marriage, Melania and Donald chose to sleep in separate bedrooms.^[189] In her first year, Melania gave only eight speeches, compared to 74 by Michelle Obama and 42 by Laura Bush.^[190] Instead of frequent



Melania Trump with Pope Francis, the Vatican, May 2017

public appearances, she communicated her activities through video.^[185] Most of Trump's appearances as first lady in 2017 were in Manhattan and Washington, and she typically spoke about women's and children's issues.^[191]

After moving to the White House, Melania opted to spend most of her time in the private quarters, running the White House staff from there instead of the first lady's East Wing offices. She oversaw restorations of several rooms in the building, including the bowling alley in the White House basement and the first lady's hairdresser's room.^[192] She kept one office, called the "swag room" by aides, in which she kept trinkets she collected while she was first lady.^[193] To accommodate Barron's soccer practice, she had a net installed on the White House grounds and had a coach practice with him.^[194] Barron remained Melania's top priority when she was first lady, and she worked to keep him free from politics to the point that staffers referred to her as "The Protector".^[195] Even after arriving at the White House, Melania spent extensive time away each year, visiting Mar-a-Lago on major holidays and over many weekends.^[196]

Melania personally involved herself in decorations and planning within the White House.^[197] She was particular about how things were designed and arranged whenever events were planned, but she would take on a calm and relaxed demeanor once the event began.^[198] Whenever a foreign dignitary arrived at the White House, Melania had the Blue Room set aside where she ate lunch or drank tea with the dignitary's spouse.^[199] When choosing which presidential china set to use, Melania often chose the Clinton administration china with its gold embroidery.^[200] She held events less frequently than her predecessors, with a typical week featuring three or fewer events, all under one hour long.^[201] Among her most ambitious projects was planning the White House Christmas decorations in 2018. Moving away from traditional designs, she filled the East Collonnade with red cranberry-laden trees set atop a green carpet. The design was widely derided, which Melania ascribed to personal taste.^[202]

To protect use of her image and maintain an income, Melania licensed photos from her photoshoots through Getty Images. This allowed her to choose how they were used by reporters, and she received royalties for each use. The Office of Government Ethics reported that she made \$100,000 to \$1,000,000 in royalties in 2017, though other estimates put it at over \$10,000,000.^[203]

As first lady, Trump was the honorary chair of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. She was unable to fulfill this duty for much of her tenure, as her husband's presidency had alienated many in the media and art communities. She made her first appearances at the Kennedy Center in 2019.^[204]

Tribulations in early 2018

A scandal broke in January 2018 when it was alleged that Donald had had an extramarital affair with the pornographic actress Stormy Daniels. The affair was said to have taken place in July 2006, after the Trumps' marriage and the birth of their son. Melania's public appearances became more infrequent after the



Melania Trump with Argentine first lady Juliana Awada in 2017



Melania Trump examining the 2018 White House Christmas decorations

news emerged, and she canceled several events that she was to attend with her husband.^[205] This included the 2018 State of the Union Address, where Melania made the unprecedented decision to ride separately from him on the way there.^[206] Michael Cohen, who had arranged the silencing of the alleged affair, stated that his greatest regret was lying to Melania, saying that she didn't deserve it.^[207] The next month, the story of a second affair in 2006 with the model Karen McDougal was made public.^{[205][208]} To Melania, the worst part was that she felt Donald had publicly humiliated her.^{[209][165]}

Melania learned in April 2018 that she was afflicted with kidney disease, but she only told her parents, her husband, and her sister.^[210] On May 14, she began treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.^[211] While her husband had wished to join her, his presence would have risked the press discovering her condition.^[212] The official statement said that she underwent an embolization, a minimally invasive procedure that deliberately blocks a blood vessel.^{[213][213]} A statement was released after the procedure was finished without complication,^[211] and she recovered in the hospital over the following five days.^[214] The extended stay led to false rumors and conspiracy theories that she had gotten plastic surgery.^{[215][216]} After leaving the hospital, she continued to stay out of the public eye until the beginning of June.^[217] At this point, the president let slip that the surgery had been more serious than initially suggested.^[218]

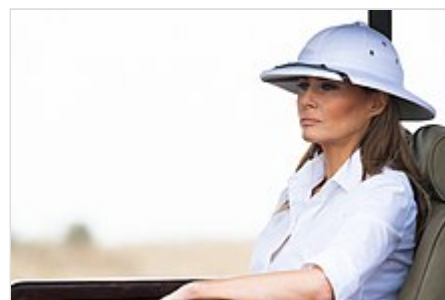


Left to right: Brigitte Macron, Melania Trump, Emmanuel Macron, Donald Trump

Those around Melania noticed that she was generally happier by mid-2018. By this time, she had reached a more advantageous marital agreement that ensured Barron would be given a fair inheritance.^[219] Her public position, and the corresponding influence she had over her husband's political career, had given her the advantage in negotiations.^[220] After several months of problems, Melania received positive coverage for a large custom-made white hat that she wore during a visit by French president Emmanuel Macron.^[221] On August 9, 2018, Melania's parents were granted American citizenship. This revitalized accusations of hypocrisy by the Trumps regarding Melania's parents, as Donald had spoken out against the chain migration process that allowed them to enter the United States.^[222]

2018 Africa tour

In October 2018, Melania took a tour of Africa without Donald, visiting Ghana, Malawi, Kenya and Egypt. She spent much of her time with children in schools, orphanages, and hospitals. She used the trip to tout relief work being carried out by the United States Agency for International Development, which raised questions about her husband's intention to cut its funding. Melania also received criticism for her fashion choices, where a photo opportunity in front of the Great Sphinx of Giza was seen as exploitive and a pith helmet she wore in Kenya was criticized for its association with colonialism in Africa. To these criticisms, she responded that people should pay more attention to her actions instead of her outfits.^[223] Perception of the trip grew worse when she responded to criticisms by saying that she was "the most bullied person in the world".^[224]



Melania Trump wearing a pith helmet in Kenya

Throughout Melania's tour of Africa, personality conflicts took place between her team and Mira Ricardel, the Deputy National Security Advisor.^[225] Ricardel's staffer had been bumped from the first lady's plane on the flight to Africa to make room for a journalist, and Ricardel subsequently became less cooperative with providing logistical information needed for the tour.^[226] Upon returning, Ricardel gave a thoroughly negative report on Melania's staff, describing them as embarrassing the White House with their partying.^[227] Melania twice complained to the president, but no immediate action was taken.^[227] So the following month, the Office of the First Lady issued an official statement calling for Ricardel to be removed from her position. Publicly commenting on such a thing was unprecedented for a first lady.^[228] No one in the administration had been told in advance about the statement, including the president.^[227] Ricardel was fired the following day.^[229] A dispute over the trip arose between Melania and Ivanka a few months later when the latter made her own trip to the continent. Melania felt that in taking such a similar trip, Ivanka was intruding on the first lady's role.^[230]

Political influence

Melania was the one person exempt from the criticism and distrust that Donald leveled against those around him in the White House. He held her opinion in high regard, often agreeing with her when she made it known, and he valued her loyalty as she did not seek public attention of her own.^[231] Melania believed that it was not her duty as first lady to take policy positions in her own right, but simply to advise Donald regarding his.^[11] She was the only person among those around him who could critique him directly without repercussion.^[232] Donald frequently asked for her opinion about issues he was considering or people who he interacted with, calling her over the phone when she was not in the same room.^[233]



Melania working with children at a 2017 Christmas event; children's welfare was among the most important issues to Melania.

Melania paid close attention to media coverage throughout Donald's presidency, providing her input on what would make good optics and maintain his image.^{[234][235]} She also provided advice on how to pose for pictures and has given him suggestions on how to appear when moving.^[236] The nature of their relationship allowed Melania to overlook erratic behavior from Donald, as she had long believed that there was no use in trying to change someone's personality, especially her husband's.^[182]

Melania had influence over her husband's staff, and Donald sometimes fired individuals on her advice.^{[188][237]} The welfare of children is a subject of interest for her, and she routinely made visits to children's hospitals throughout her tenure as first lady.^[238] According to her biographer Kate Bennett, interacting with children is one of the rare things that causes Melania to shift away from her usual stoic demeanor.^[239] Her advocacy was a major factor in her husband's decision to ban fruit flavored electronic cigarettes.^[240] About one year into her tenure, Melania hired Reagan Thompson as a policy advisor, though she had yet to adopt any official initiatives at the time.^[241]

Family separation policy

Trump was openly critical of her husband's "zero tolerance" policy of denying asylum at the Mexico–United States border in 2018, where children were being separated from their parents. Her official position was that she hated to see families separated and hoped for successful immigration reform.^{[242][243]} Out of

public view, she made her opposition clear to the president and influenced his decision to end it.^[244] Leaked tapes in 2020 featured Melania making statements defending some of the practices, expressing grief about family separation but questioning the validity of asylum claims and dismissing concerns that children were kept in substandard conditions.^[245]

Melania was upset when her stepdaughter Ivanka began receiving the credit for changing the president's mind on the issue.^[246] Melania decided to visit the border herself, ignoring her husband's worries about keeping media attention on the border and the Secret Service's need of advance notice to plan her trip.^[247] She arrived at the border on June 21, where she visited the family separation facilities in Texas and attended a roundtable with doctors, medical staff, social workers, and other experts at Upbring New Hope Children's Shelter.^[248] On the way to the border facility, she caused controversy by wearing a jacket that read, "I really don't care, do u?" After much speculation about the jacket's message, including criticism that she may have been expressing indifference toward the families separated at the border, Trump stated that the jacket was aimed at people and media who were criticizing her.^[249] The jacket dominated media coverage of her visit.^[250]

Be Best campaign

On May 7, 2018, Trump held a press conference in the White House Rose Garden to announce her official public initiative as first lady, the Be Best awareness campaign. The initiative was created to support the welfare of children, advocate against cyberbullying, and prevent opioid abuse.^{[214][251]} The initiative's name drew ridicule in the press for its grammatical structure.^[252] Instead of creating new programs like previous first ladies' projects, Be Best promoted existing initiatives and organizations that worked toward the cause. Public awareness of the initiative remained low, and it was often regarded solely as an anti-cyberbullying campaign.^[253]



Melania Trump celebrating the second anniversary of the Be Best campaign

The Be Best campaign drew criticism for its perceived hypocrisy, challenging cyberbullying when her husband was well known for attacking people online.^[254] Even Donald had warned her before the campaign's launch that the contrast may provoke criticism.^[253] She acknowledged the discrepancy but insisted that she would continue because she felt it was a good cause.^[254] This received more attention in 2019 when the president made Twitter posts critical of Greta Thunberg, a teenage environmental activist diagnosed on the autism spectrum. This came days after Melania had criticized Pamela Karlan for invoking Barron in a speech against the president. The first lady's office responded that spouses such as her and Donald communicate differently, and said that Barron was not "an activist who travels the globe giving speeches".^[255]

COVID-19 and 2020 presidential campaign

Trump underwent a major reorganization of her staff in April 2020 in anticipation of her husband's reelection campaign. She appointed Marcia Lee Kelly as her senior advisor and Emma Doyle as her policy advisor. Her chief of staff Lindsay Reynolds was removed, with her responsibilities going to Melania's communications director Stephanie Grisham.^[185] Trump became an active campaigner for her husband during the 2020 presidential election, which was a strong contrast to her 2016 activity.^[256]

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Melania was criticized for promoting a White House renovation project. She took the topic more seriously after the COVID-19 lockdowns began, using her Twitter to encourage social distancing during the pandemic and promote official medical advice. Much of what she posted directly contradicted what her husband posted, as he discouraged many of the recommended practices.^[257]



Melania with first responders during the COVID-19 pandemic

On October 1, 2020, Melania's former advisor Stephanie Winston Wolkoff released audiotapes that featured Melania making profane statements about her image and role as first lady. In the tapes, she condemned the media for not giving her positive coverage, questioned why people wanted her to speak out against her husband when she supported his policies, and expressed frustration with her responsibility to oversee Christmas decorations in the White House. She also mentioned her "I really don't care, do u" jacket in the tapes, admitting that she wore it to irritate liberals. Winston Wolkoff had released the tapes alongside a tell-all book, *Melania and Me*.^{[245][258]} The Justice Department filed a civil suit against Wolkoff in October 2019, alleging breach of a nondisclosure agreement, but it was dropped in February 2021 under the Biden administration.^[259] In September 2022, Trump said in an interview with *Breitbart News* that the audiotapes had been strategically edited to make people believe that her duties in the White House had been unimportant to her.^[260]

Despite Donald Trump's loss of the 2020 election, Melania Trump ended her tenure by endorsing his false statement that he had been the legitimate election winner.^{[193][224]} For her final months in the White House, she stopped visiting her office in the East Wing, instead staying in the White House residence dressed in terrycloth bathrobes. Her focus at this time was on compiling photo albums of the decorations and renovations she had overseen through her tenure.^[193] Melania was overseeing photography at the White House when the January 6 United States Capitol attack took place and gave no comment at the time. She later said that she would have commented if she had been "fully informed of all the details".^[165] Her communications director Stephanie Grisham later stated she had sent Melania a text message asking her to make a statement condemning the violence and resigned when that did not happen.^[193] On January 18, Melania released a farewell video asking the American people to uphold the principles of her Be Best campaign.^[224] She did not contact incoming first lady Jill Biden to make transition arrangements or provide her the traditional tour of the White House.^[224] She did, however, follow the tradition of leaving a letter for the incoming first lady.^[193]

Subsequent activities

After the Trumps left the White House, Melania returned to Mar-a-Lago, where she could live while avoiding public attention.^[165] She retained one White House advisor, Marcia Lee Kelly, to help her during the post-presidency.^[224] Melania kept in contact with her successor Jill Biden, and the two have exchanged birthday cards.^[193] Since her tenure as first lady ended, Melania has made occasional paid speaking appearances, she has founded a scholarship program for foster children, and she has minted a line of Apollo 11-themed non-fungible tokens that were not in compliance with NASA's image use policy.^[165] In November 2023, Melania attended the memorial service for former First Lady Rosalynn Carter.^[261]

Melania remained out of public view during her husband's court appearances and his candidacy in the 2024 presidential election, limiting her campaign events to two fundraisers for the Log Cabin Republicans. She became more visible in July 2024 by putting out a statement following the attempted assassination of her husband and appearing at the 2024 Republican National Convention, though she declined an invitation to speak at the event, making her the first candidate's spouse not to speak at the convention since Barbara Bush began the tradition.^[262]

Public image

Trump limits her interactions with the public, creating a public image heavily influenced by speculation.^[263] She worked to protect her privacy as first lady,^[264] and her staff was instructed not to answer any questions about her whereabouts at a given time.^[183] With limited information, commentators have portrayed her as being a reluctant companion to her husband or as a woman who has no independence of her own.^[265] Several incidents during her husband's presidency led to rumors that she had a secret animosity toward her husband, such as her delay in moving to the White House and allegations that he had committed adultery.^{[215][264]} The rumors led to popular use of the hashtag #FreeMelania by those who believed them.^[266] Though she disliked the idea that people saw her as helpless, Melania found the campaign amusing.^[267] This became less common by 2020 as she took a more active role in the administration.^[268] She is often seen as cold by the public, though people who interact with her describe her as a warm presence.^{[1][269]}



A 2017 Women's March protestor with a Free Melania sign

As with previous first ladies, Trump's fashion was heavily scrutinized, and particularly expensive pieces were criticized.^[191] More than other first ladies, her fashion was scrutinized in the context of her past as a fashion model and her marriage to a billionaire.^[270] She did her own clothes shopping,^{[271][272]} but she was assisted by designer Hervé Pierre,^[273] hair stylist Mordechai Alvow, and make up artist Nicole Byrl.^[274] When preparing for speeches, she dedicated more attention to her physical appearance than content or delivery, which her staff felt affected her ability to promote her causes.^[275] Despite her experience in fashion, she disliked that it was such a major aspect of news coverage about her as first lady.^[276]

Since the only previous foreign-born first lady had an American father, Melania has been seen by the American public as the first foreigner first lady.^[277] Having a Slovenian-born woman as the American first lady became a point of national pride in Slovenia, and it gave the nation a sense of recognition on the world stage.^{[278][279]} Melania Trump's hometown Sevnica has developed a small tourist industry around her, and Melania-themed merchandise was common during her tenure as first lady. These items never used Melania's full name, substituting it with "first lady" or "M", as she is protective of her personality rights.^[280]

During the 2016 presidential election, Trump became the only candidate's spouse to have a negative approval rating since polling began in 1988.^[281] Her approval rating stood at 36–37% in the months leading up to becoming first lady in January 2017,^{[282][154]} but it increased to 57% in a CNN poll in April 2018 after she received public sympathy amid allegations that her husband had committed

adultery.^{[241][283]} Trump finished her tenure in 2021 as the least popular first lady since polling began with a rating of 42%.^[284] Multiple polls during her tenure as first lady showed her as the most popular member of the Trump family.^{[282][285][286]}

In December 2020, the Siena College Research Institute released a study surveying scholars and historians on their assessments of American first ladies. It was the fifth such first ladies study that the Institute had conducted since 1982, and the first in which Trump appeared. Trump was ranked as being the worst of 40 assessed American first ladies,^[287] receiving the lowest assessments in all of the metrics that were weighed.^[288]

Footnotes

- a. Pronounced /məˈlɑːniə/ *mə-LAH-nee-ə*; name prior to her marriage: **Melania Knauss** (IPA: [mɛˈlɑːniə ˈknaʊs]), a Germanization of her Slovene birth name **Melanija Knavs** (IPA: [mɛˈlɑːnija ˈknaːws]).

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External links

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