

Group 27 (2 members)

Professor Groeling

Times over Time Project

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## The First Lady: The Media's Coverage of the President's Wife

### Research Question & Hypothesis

Through our research we will attempt to answer one primary question: Over time, has the presidential candidate's wife's role evolved as women's rights have increased?

We expect to see the role and coverage of the First Ladies expand as time goes on. We especially expect to see growth in their roles after 1920 (women's suffrage) and during the 1960s (the feminist movement).

### Introduction

When Harry S. Truman left the White House, he addressed the American people and urged them to "take time to evaluate the true role of the wife of the president and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes"<sup>1</sup>. The first lady's political influence is unequivocal as one of the few individuals that has direct and intimate access to one of the most powerful persons in the world. For voters, knowing about a presidential candidate's family and personal life allows them to conjecture about their character and thus about his viability as president. The way in which a president uses or manages the political and cultural assets that a first lady provides says a great deal about the style and impact of an administration.

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<sup>1</sup> "Source Material": Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship. Robert P. Watson. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 423-441. Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552493>.

Beyond the political arena, increasing fascination with the first lady has spread into mainstream society. From Jackie Kennedy to Nancy Reagan to Michelle Obama, the public craves information about these key figures not only during their time at the White House, but during the campaign, as well. The information that we receive from the media helps shape our ideas and perception of candidates. Given the increasing impact of the first lady, our group wants to make use of ProQuest archives to further inquire on the evolution of the role of the first lady and evaluate the way the media is portraying this change from 1900 to 1980. This will allow us to have a more dynamic appreciation of the media's role in elections, their development of coverage and their appeal to a commonly disenfranchised group of voters.

## Methodology

Using ProQuest, our search will include historical archives of the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. We will analyze stories beginning on the first day of the year of an election year until the day before the election. For elections when no incumbent is running (as they are surprisingly rare) we will search for the woman whose husband wound up winning the election. We will begin with the general election of 1900 and end with the general election of 1980<sup>2</sup>. We will search for the women by their first and last name, by their married name (i.e. "Mrs. Candidate") and by using the terms "Candidate's name" and "wife."

The analysis will be based on the number of stories mentioning the First Ladies and the depiction of them in these stories. We will look for the women's roles to be either "traditional"

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<sup>2</sup> The workload was split as evenly as possible. Member A searched elections held from 1900-1916 and 1940-1956 while Member B searched elections held from 1920-1936 and 1960-1980. Overall, 3,750 articles were found (1,534 for Member A and 2,216 for Member B). Most of the articles were about the president, mentioning the First Lady only in passing, making them easy to scan through. Articles specifically about the First Lady were, for the most part, quite short. The writing of the Introduction was split in half. The Data Analysis of the years from 1900-1956 and the conclusion was done by Member A. Member B wrote up 1960-1980 and constructed the graphs.

or “modern.” We will look at two factors in determining traditional v. modern roles. First, we will look at the way the newspaper portrays the candidates’ wives. Do they describe her as a “dutiful housewife” or is she deemed “independent?” Second, we will look at her activities. Does she host dinner parties or is she an active campaigner? Is she a stay-at-home mother or career woman?

## Data Analysis

Our research shows that the role of the First Lady has, indeed, evolved over time and in some instances, as with Eleanor Roosevelt, grown much quicker than expected. The expansion of the role was accompanied by a rise in coverage as well as tone. While our results followed the path we expected, rising over time and seeing significant gains around the time of women’s suffrage and the feminist movement, we also witnessed that it is the women inhabiting the office that truly give it significance.

One of the most surprising findings was that during almost the entire first half of the twentieth century the First Lady was uniformly referred to by her married name, never mentioning her first name. While searching the databases for Ida McKinley, the First Lady from 1897 to 1901, no results were found using the simple search of “Ida McKinley.” However, when the search was changed to “Mrs. McKinley” there were a total of 54 articles about the president’s wife.

The same can be said for Mrs. McKinley’s successors. Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft and Edith Wilson were never referred to by name in any of the papers used in our search. Helen Taft’s name did appear once in the *Los Angeles Times* but it had simply reprinted a letter the First Lady had written concerning the sinking of the Titanic which she signed with her name.

The duties of the First Lady in the first quarter of the century rarely went beyond playing hostess or accompanying her husband to various affairs. She was primarily an afterthought. The only times Ida McKinley was mentioned in the headline was with the phrase “accompanied by his wife.” The only instance of Mrs. McKinley being mentioned outside of her husband was an instance in which a pair of gold spoons she had donated to a Baptist Charity was sold.

Mrs. McKinley’s successors had precious few stories written about them specifically. These stories all focused on the maternal instincts or doting wifery of the First Lady. Edith Roosevelt, for example, cared for the son of the Attorney General when his wife was out of town. Edith Wilson ran afoul of the law when she left a \$5 tip for a waitress in Iowa, an act that was illegal in the state at the time.

As the women’s suffrage movement picked up steam, the role of the First Lady did as well. In 1912, Mrs. Taft headlined a conference that was confronting the mistreatment of women in textile plants. Mrs. Taft merely listened to the stories of women but it was a significant event none the less.

Four years after women achieved suffrage, the interest in and perception of the First Lady spiked significantly. In 1924 Grace Coolidge saw more than twice as many stories mentioning her than the previous incumbent First Lady, Edith Wilson. Though it was still rare, Grace Coolidge was the first First Lady to be referred to by name in print. Mrs. Coolidge was also the first First Lady to have comments that she made be quoted in a paper outside the context of reprinting a letter (she is quoted as saying “Nice to have you” during one of the events she hosted).

The majority of stories surrounding Grace Coolidge still focused on her duties as hostess, doting wife and her reputation for being a fashionable dresser. However, Grace holds another

first for First Ladies; she is the first to have her former career brought up. She was praised for being a teacher at a “deaf and dumb” school before she married Mr. Coolidge.

With each year the number of stories mentioning the First Lady continued to grow. Certain years saw spikes, however, that had to do with the acts of the First Lady more so than the office itself. In 1916, for example, a spike was witnessed. The bulk of the stories appeared at the beginning of the year because late in 1915 President Wilson had married Edith Galt after the death of his first wife one year prior. These stories consisted mainly of covering the first event hosted by the new First Lady as well as the couple’s honeymoon.

The First Lady’s involvement in the campaign has also changed. In the early part of the twentieth century it was a fairly new idea that the candidate himself would be an active campaigner so to have husband and wife both campaigning would have been perfectly unseemly. Articles describing the First Lady attending campaign events with her husband were unheard of. She would travel with him, at the very most, but was completely divorced from the campaign. The First Lady did have one symbolic role during campaign season before the advent of radio and television. She was cordially invited to the opposition party’s convention to hear, first hand, who received the nomination to run against her husband. William J. Bryan, the man running against incumbent President McKinley in 1900 even had to censor himself at the convention as not to “offend the sensibilities” of the present First Lady McKinley.

The most severe transformation of the office of First Lady (and, yes, it is considered an office of the White House) came about with the induction of Eleanor Roosevelt. Even before her husband was officially elected, Eleanor was a super star garnering nearly as much press overall as the incumbent First Lady. This is impressive considering her husband’s candidacy was not announced until the Democratic convention in early July.

Eleanor broke all the rules. She was outspoken on campaign issues, civil rights struggles, women's rights and much more. She was the first First Lady to speak at all on policy issues. She even accompanied him on the campaign trail where she touted her intention to be more than a "merely dutiful First Lady." Mrs. Roosevelt was often quoted in the papers and on actual issues affecting the nation. Her influence spread beyond the campaign trail. She was well versed in making waves in Washington D.C., as well.

Eleanor, dubbed "The Mother of a Nation," testified before Congress in 1940 on the plight of the migrant farm worker. She also held multiple conferences regarding African American rights and other civil rights struggles. She was an accomplished author while serving as First Lady. During the year 1940 alone she penned three books. During her husband's final campaign (and final full year in office) her coverage declined. With America fully embroiled in World War II, Eleanor put much of her pet projects on the back burner and toured veteran hospitals to visit wounded soldiers.

Eleanor's successors to the office were not nearly as vocal as her. Her immediate successor, Elizabeth "Bess" Truman, is said to have had a disdain for being in the public eye. She fulfilled only essential duties as First Lady and did little else. During her one and only press conference (which required questions to be submitted in advance and most answers consisted of "no comment") she was asked if she wanted her daughter to run for president to which the First Lady replied, "most definitely not." Her mentions in the press numbered less than half of Eleanor's slowest year. Mrs. Truman's successor, Mamie Eisenhower, relished her role as hostess but was mum on policy issues. Most of the stories regarding Mrs. Eisenhower were around her renowned ability to throw a party. Mrs. Eisenhower had to put up with rumors that

she had a drinking problem as she was prone to staggering when walked. The First Lady actually was diagnosed with an inner ear problem that affected her balance.

With a new decade, the coverage of the First Lady morphed drastically. The articles become increasingly personal and critical about the candidates wife as they try to assess her capability to be the First Lady. The first one to see this change was Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy, who was referred by name in 57 out of 145 articles and had 25 articles specifically about her. Jackie Kennedy, in the early start of John F. Kennedy's [JFK] presidential campaign, attracts the first negative coverage of any candidate's wife in prior years. The media's tone toward a candidate's wife was usually positive or neutral. Yet in one note, the author describes Jackie as too young, too rich, too beautiful and as a possible liability to JFK's campaign. Besides the negative tone of this specific article, all other articles praised her charm and confidence and mostly her sense of fashion. One article describes her beauty in a prospective First Lady as an "unknown quality in modern politics." Many of the notes were biographical in nature, and placed a great deal of emphasis on her education as well as her "idolization" of her husband. This trend of presenting the candidates' wives as "educated housewives," becomes prominent during the last twenty years of the news coverage of potential first ladies. With little to no emphasis on their hosting duties, the housewives that were depicted early in the 1900s evolved into active members of the campaign.

The coverage of Lady Bird Johnson exemplifies this intensifying tendency. She was one of the most widely covered first ladies with 826 articles in which 178 mention her first name and 375 are specifically about her. In her coverage we see a shift in the role of First- Ladies-to-be and the expectation of the media. As an active campaigner, Lady Bird Johnson is described as eloquent, charming, cordial and extremely independent. She was depicted as an independent

woman about 388 times. Her openness to the press and her solo-campaigning made her a sensation amongst the media, placing her at the forefront of First Ladies.

Thelma Catherine “Pat” Nixon further epitomizes our current expectations of a prospective First Lady’s duties. In one of the notes she is described as working “almost as hard as her husband” in the campaign. Yet, her coverage changed drastically in 1968 compared to 1972. In the 1968 campaign year, she had only 82 articles about her, where more than half (42) refer to her by her first name and only 17 articles were specifically about her. During this electoral year, Pat Nixon is described as an active campaigner, devoted wife and mother, quiet and modest. She even describes herself in one of her comments as only a “volunteer of the campaign”. In contrast, the 1972 campaign year, she had 573 articles written about her, where 179 mention her first name and 130 are specifically about her. The tones of the notes have a visible change. She is described as chatty, a cultural activist, hard working, gregarious and a foreign diplomat. She is more outspoken and relaxed. She becomes more vocal on issues, including abortion and women’s rights. The coverage of a series of solo foreign and domestic missions she did during this campaign year depicted her as an independent woman. She advocated for more politically active women and in one of her comments she freely claimed that she was “completely liberated. Dick knows I do whatever I want.” This type of comments gave her very positive coverage, something that would have not been seen in the earlier articles of prospective First Lady.

The coverage of Rosalynn Smith Carter continues to highlight the wives active campaigning. She is described as a woman who has endured and prevail, a tough, tireless campaigner, whose toughness prevails in every message she sends to the American people. She talks actively about issues and provided direction to her husband campaign. In one instance,



where the media was focusing on Carter's position on Abortion, Rosalynn gave an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* declaring that there were many other things that the American people should be concerned about, including unemployment and poverty. Beyond her candid tenacious nature unseen in a wife of a presidential candidate, Mrs. Carter also has an unprecedented number of articles that mentioned her first name. Out of 119 total articles, 108 mention her first name. This demonstrates the importance of knowing the First Lady to be as an independent woman, not as the partner of the president as seen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the media's coverage of Nancy Reagan is similar to what we see and expect nowadays. She is depicted as an activist prospective first lady. Her coverage focuses on her own campaign event, acting beyond her duties of a doting wife. Out of the 272 articles, 186 referred to her by her first name. All of the articles have a very critical, yet positive tone. As seen since the 1960s, the media's role regarding the presidential candidate's wives is to assess their character and viability to carry out the job of First Lady. The media coverage of Nancy Reagan as compared to Ida McKinley illustrates the revolution of women's role in society and the media has set up expectations that more and more prospective First Ladies have tried to fulfill.

## Conclusion

The First Lady's importance and prominence has, indeed, increased over time. Her role and media perception saw gains, especially after women's suffrage and the feminist movement of the sixties. In the Appendix, the graphs show this trend with a high degree of clarity. There are two major spikes in the coverage of the First Ladies between the mid-20s and 30s and between the early-60s and late-70s. The prominence of the office is owed to the various women who inhabited it. Steady gains were seen until the tenure of Eleanor Roosevelt who, among First Ladies, is still a superstar. Only a little more than a decade after women's suffrage Mrs.

Roosevelt revolutionized the role of the First Lady from one of hostess to one of activist. She made waves throughout her husband's administration and even after it (she was appointed by JFK to head the President's Commission on the Status of Women, for example). During the sixties we even saw Jackie become an attack point of the Republican opposition for the first time. The histories of elections in the 20th Century clearly have shown the advancements of women and, by implication, the First Lady. Women such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Jackie Kennedy not only benefitted from the women's movements of their time but they bolstered them and we see that tradition continue in our current First Ladies as is evidenced by the fact that less than two years ago a former First Lady came only a few shattered glass ceiling tiles away from becoming president herself.

## Appendix: Data and Graphs

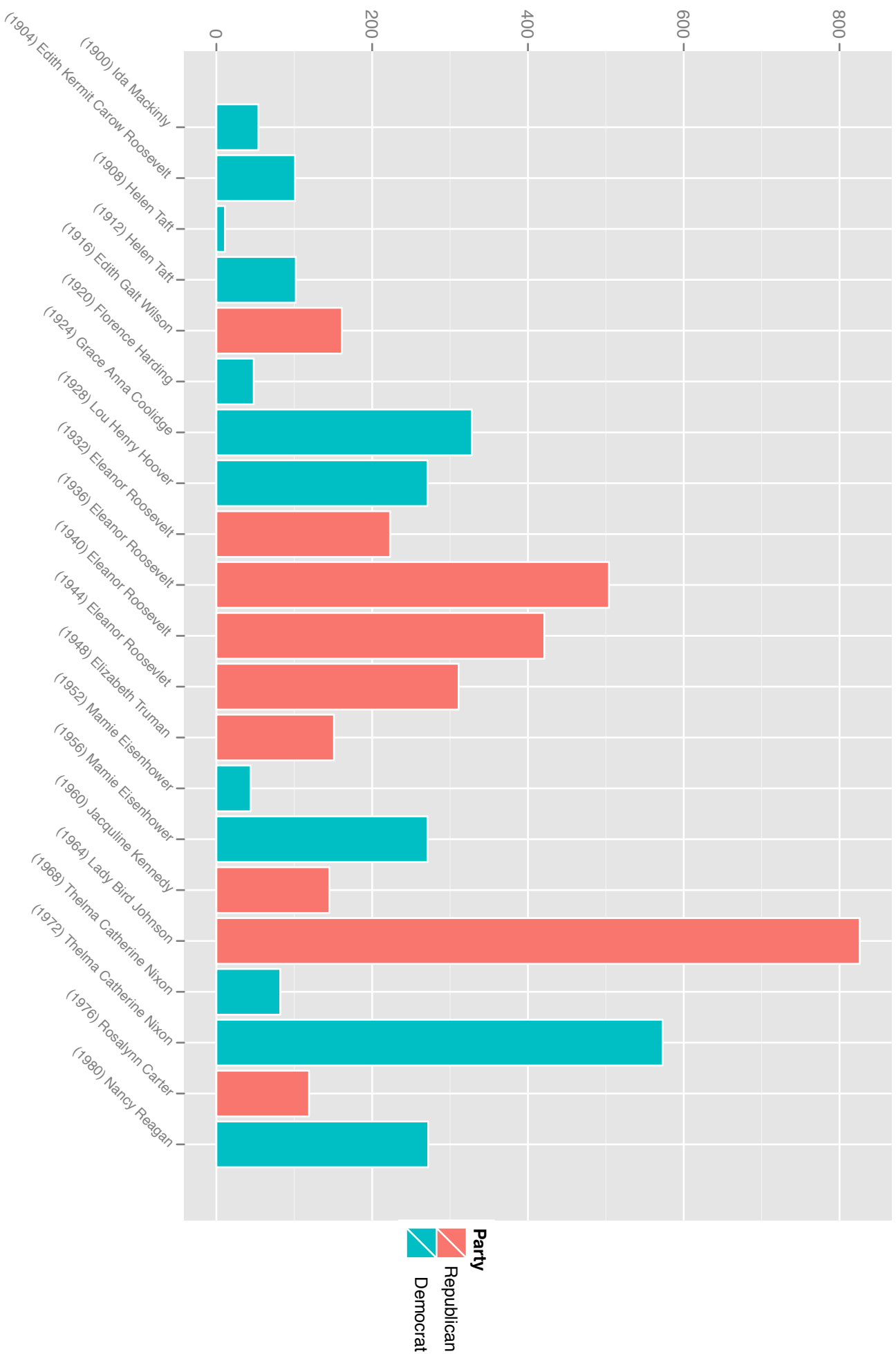
Year	First Lady	Number of Articles	Number of articles that mention her first name	Percentage of Articles that mention her first name
1900	Ida McKinley	54	0	0
1904	Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt	101	0	0
1908	Helen Taft	11	0	0
1912	Helen Taft	102	1	0.98
1916	Edith Galt Wilson	161	0	0
1920	Florence Harding	48	0	0
1924	Grace Anna Coolidge	328	3	0.91
1928	Lou Henry Hoover	271	36	13.28
1932	Eleanor Roosevelt	223	11	4.93
1936	Eleanor Roosevelt	504	82	16.27
1940	Eleanor Roosevelt	421	19	4.51
1944	Eleanor Roosevelt	311	4	1.29
1948	Elizabeth Truman	151	2	1.32
1952	Mamie Eisenhower	44	3	7
1956	Mamie Eisenhower	271	14	5.17
1960	Jacqueline Kennedy	145	57	57
1964	Lady Bird Johnson	826	178	21.55
1968	Thelma Catherine Nixon	82	42	51.22
1972	Thelma Catherine Nixon	573	197	34.38
1976	Rosalynn Carter	119	108	90.76
1980	Nancy Reagan	272	186	68.38

Year	First Lady	Number of Comments made by First Lady	Number of Articles specifically about the First Lady	Percentage of Articles specifically about the first lady
1900	Ida McKinley	0	1	1.85
1904	Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt	0	4	3.96
1908	Helen Taft	0	0	0
1912	Helen Taft	1	1	0.98
1916	Edith Galt Wilson	1	8	4.97
1920	Florence Harding	14	14	29.17
1924	Grace Anna Coolidge	2	64	19.51
1928	Lou Henry Hoover	9	41	15.13
1932	Eleanor Roosevelt	27	37	16.59
1936	Eleanor Roosevelt	76	94	18.65
1940	Eleanor Roosevelt	28	49	11.64

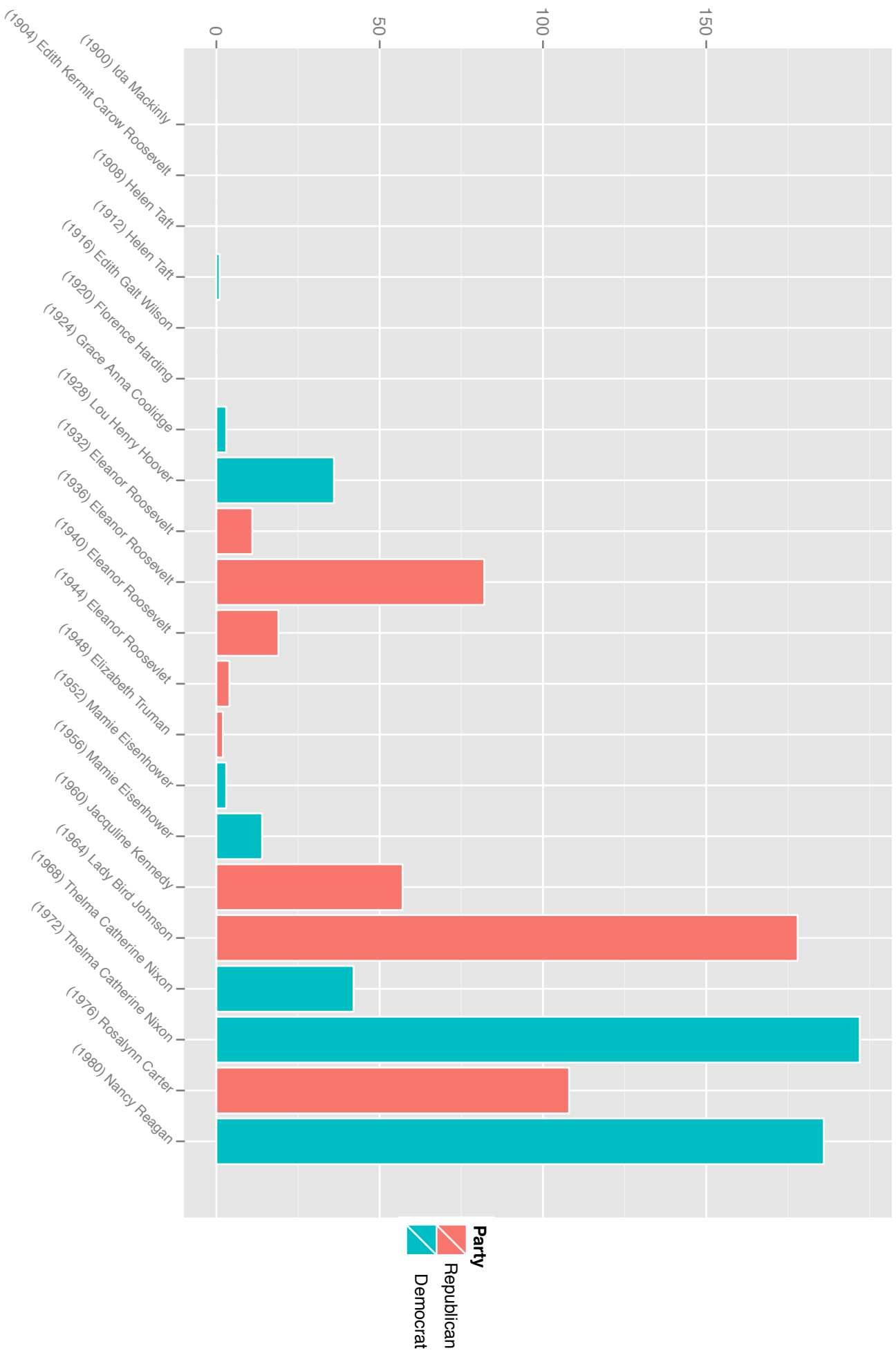
1944	Eleanor Roosevelt	28	49	15.76
1948	Elizabeth Truman	2	6	3.97
1952	Mamie Eisenhower	0	0	0
1956	Mamie Eisenhower	28	24	8.86
1960	Jacqueline Kennedy	54	25	17.24
1964	Lady Bird Johnson	291	375	45.4
1968	Thelma Catherine Nixon	22	17	20.73
1972	Thelma Catherine Nixon	780	130	22.69
1976	Rosalynn Carter	59	36	30.25
1980	Nancy Reagan	112	72	26.47

Year	First Lady	Acted as Hostess to foreign leaders or other elected officials	Attended party/reception with president	Depicted as doting wife	Depicted as independent woman
1900	Ida McKinley	10	12	2	0
1904	Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt	11	9	1	0
1908	Helen Taft	0	0	2	0
1912	Helen Taft	5	12	0	5
1916	Edith Galt Wilson	8	22	5	5
1920	Florence Harding	4	17	12	8
1924	Grace Anna Coolidge	7	67	6	0
1928	Lou Henry Hoover	9	22	20	43
1932	Eleanor Roosevelt	6	26	5	19
1936	Eleanor Roosevelt	36	43	16	30
1940	Eleanor Roosevelt	20	40	13	20
1944	Eleanor Roosevelt	20	16	9	20
1948	Elizabeth Truman	20	17	9	4
1952	Mamie Eisenhower	0	0	4	1
1956	Mamie Eisenhower	32	23	13	9
1960	Jacqueline Kennedy	2	3	7	14
1964	Lady Bird Johnson	160	253	128	172
1968	Thelma Catherine Nixon	1	6	2	9
1972	Thelma Catherine Nixon	0	115	45	98
1976	Rosalynn Carter	0	5	6	10
1980	Nancy Reagan	0	28	36	40

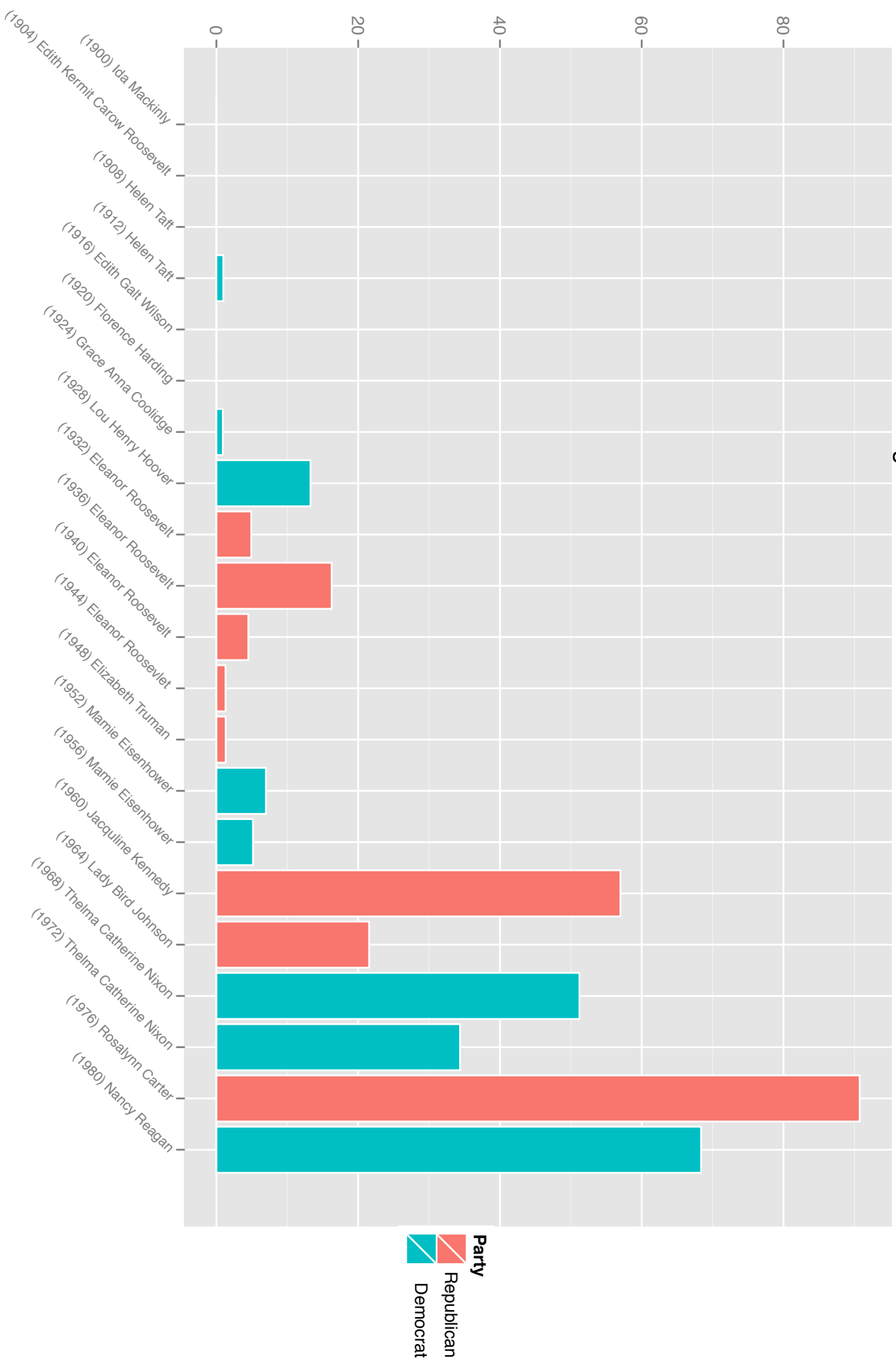
Number of Articles



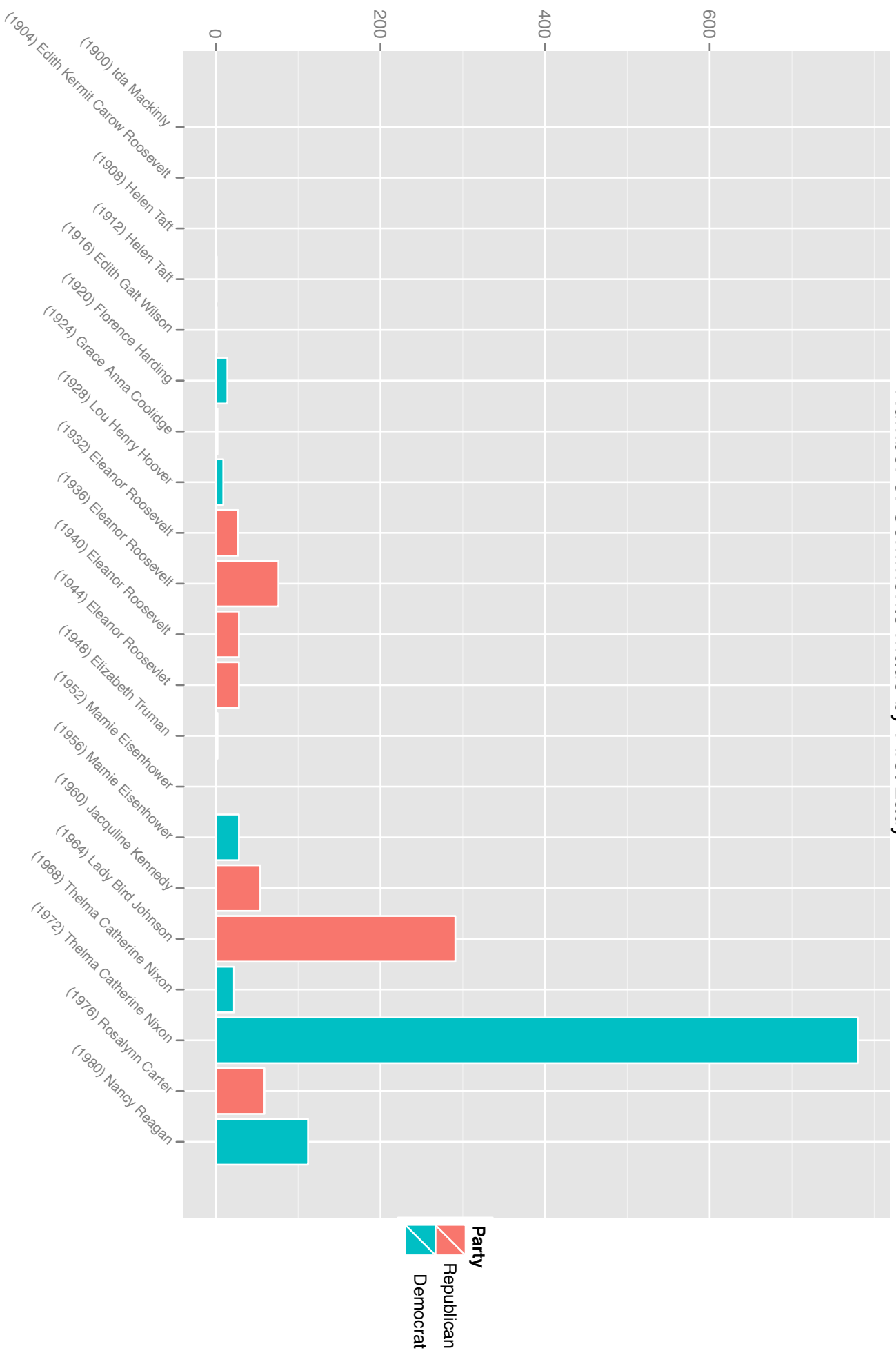
Number of articles that mention her first name



Percentage of Articles that mention her first name

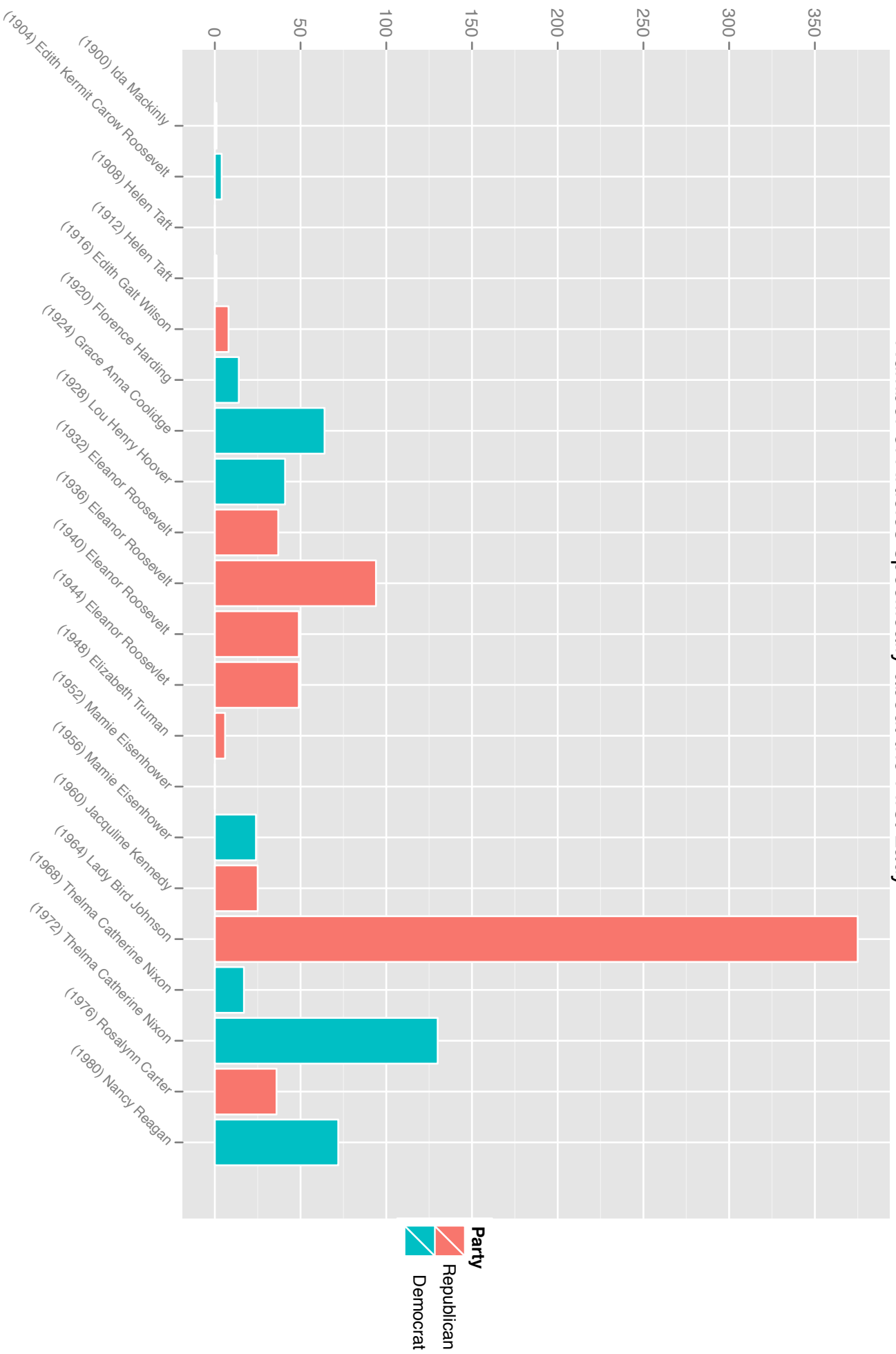


Number of Comments made by First Lady

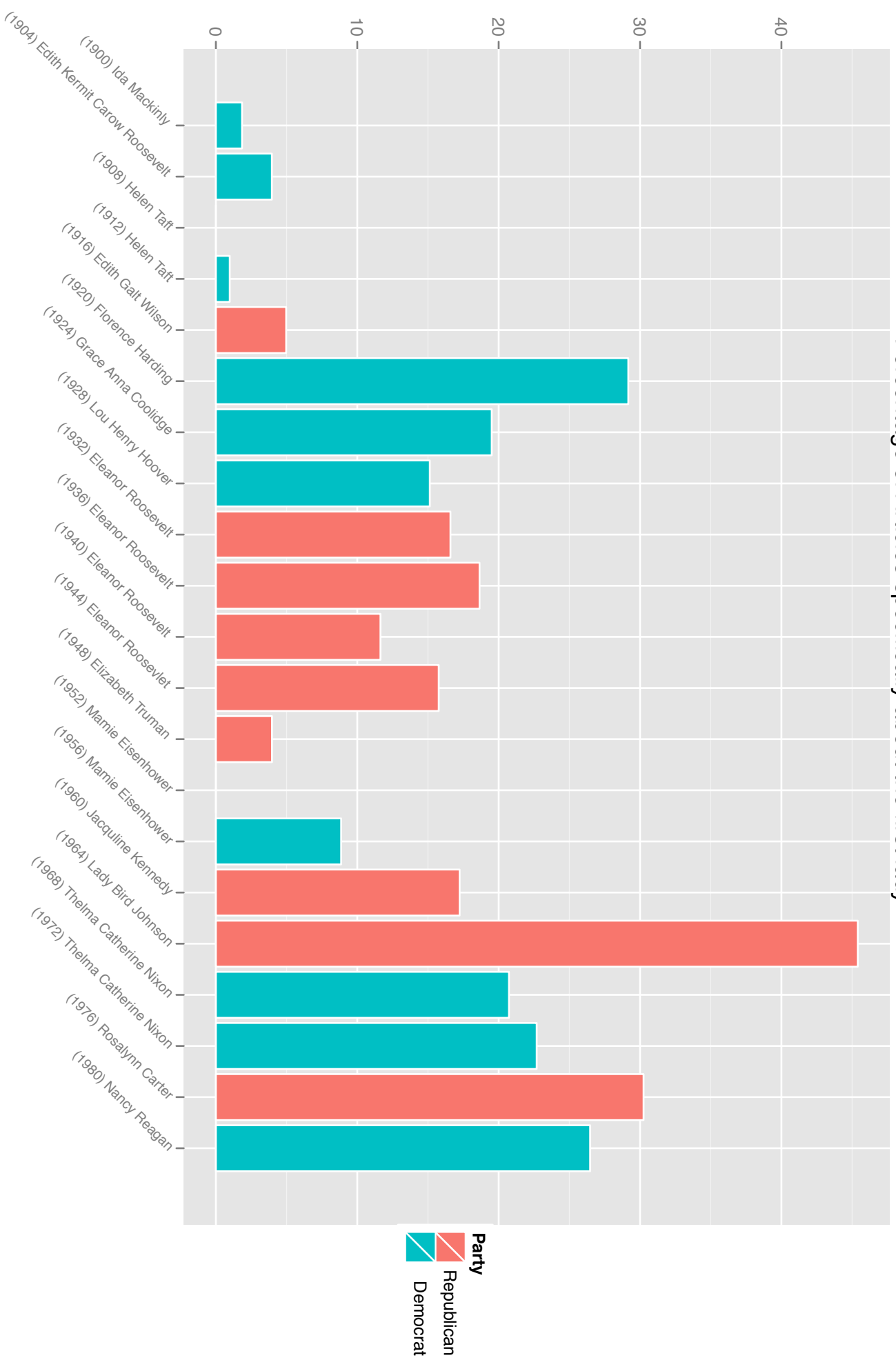




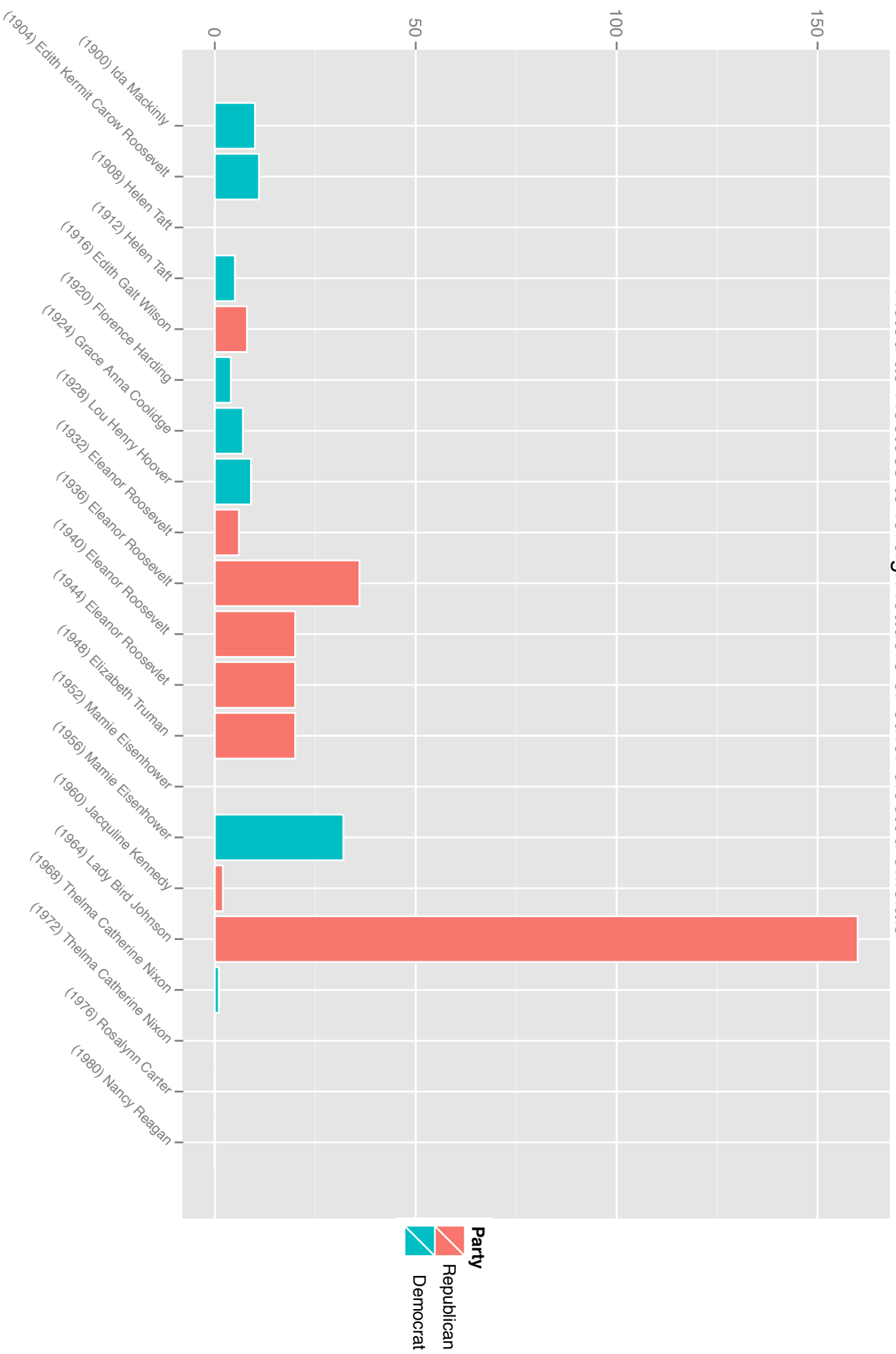
Number of Articles specifically about the First Lady



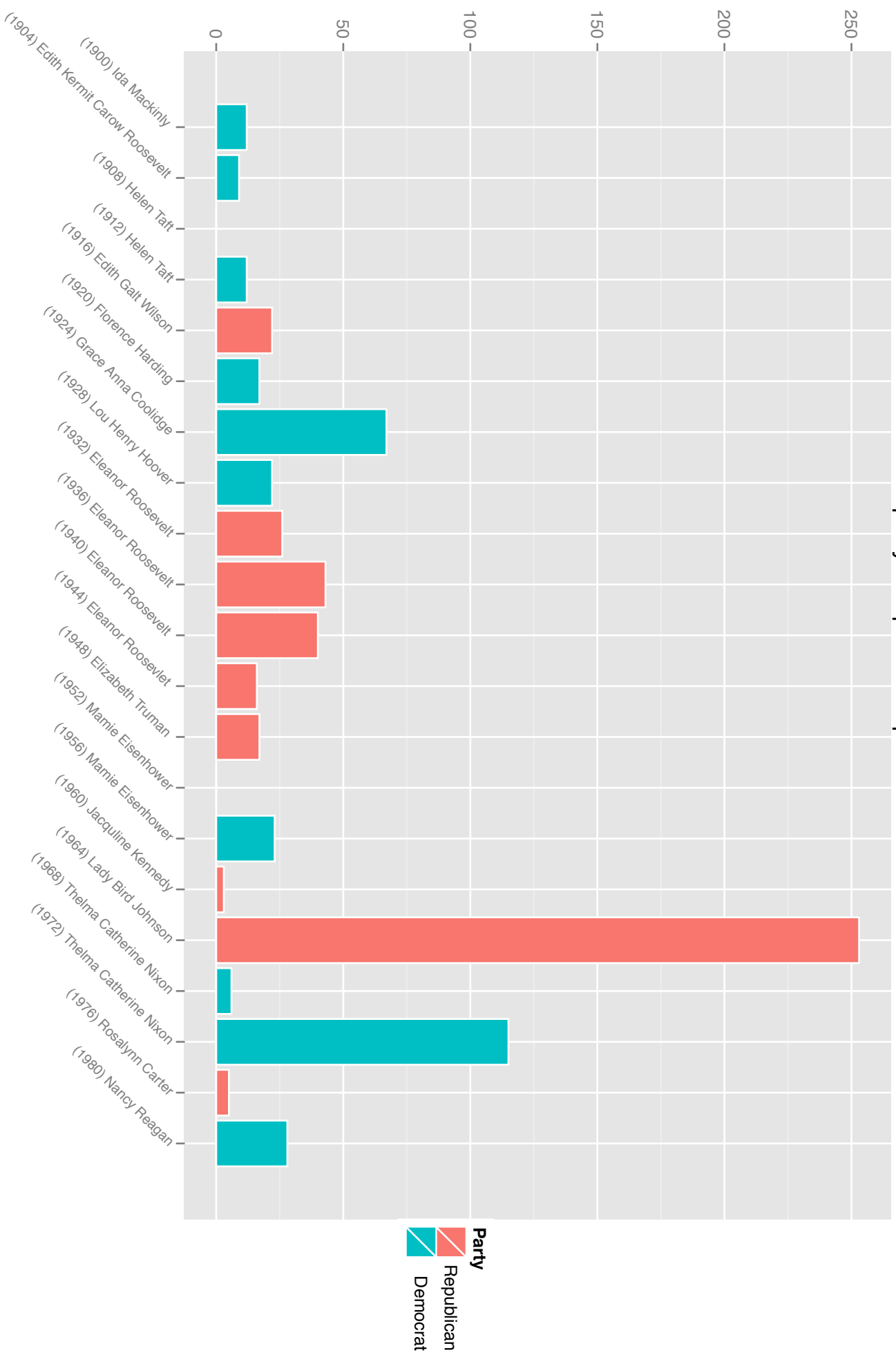
Percentage of Articles specifically about the first lady



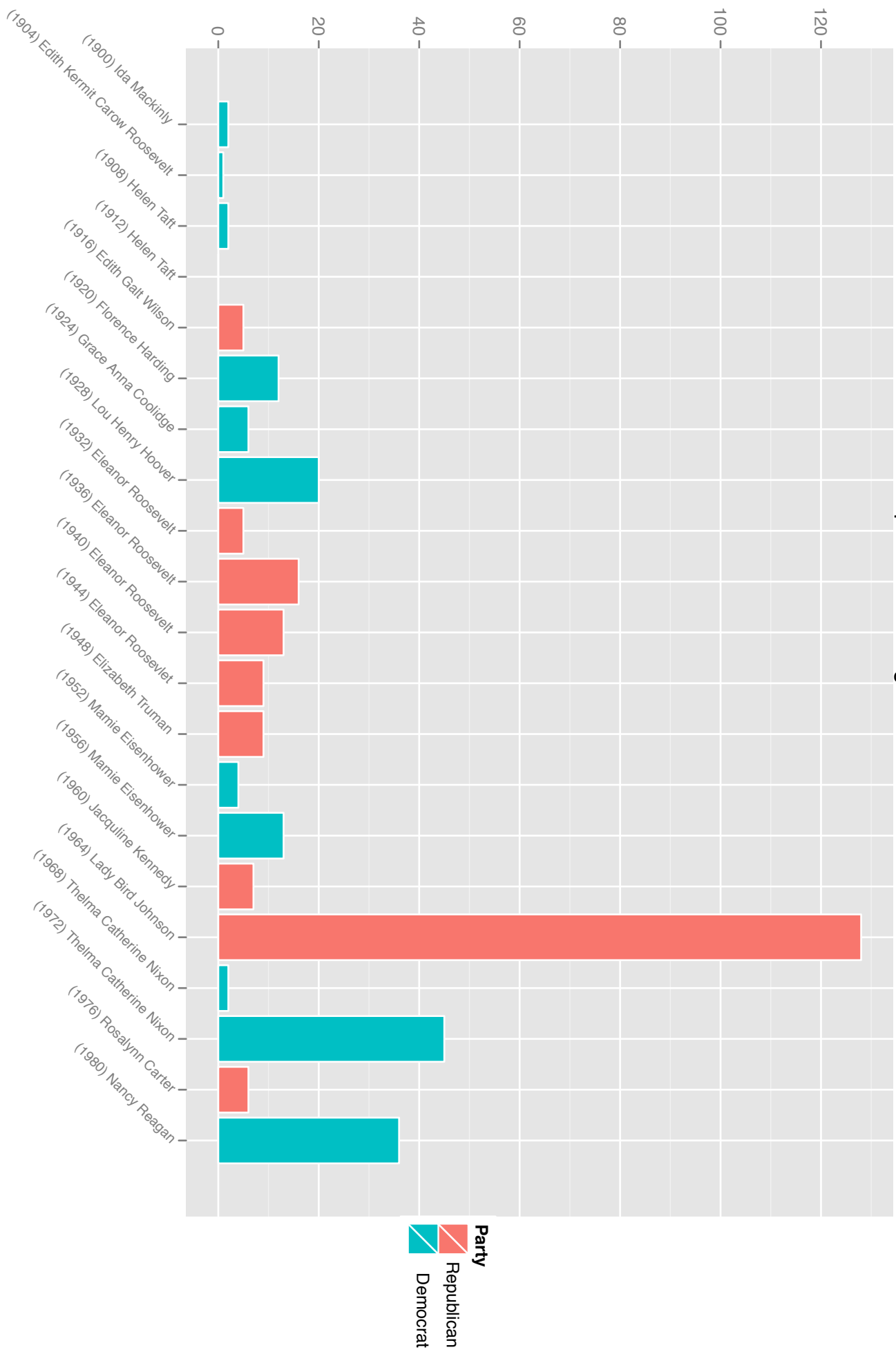
Acted as Hostess to foreign leaders or other elected officials



Attended party reception with president



Depicted as dotting wide



Depicted as independent woman

