Michelle Obama's popularity soars, topping recent first ladies, survey finds

Public opinion poll shows her appeal crosses party lines

By Mark Silva | Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON -- Michelle Obama has "kind of taken the country by storm."

When a serious-minded pollster such as Andrew Kohut offers that explanation for the first lady's soaring approval ratings, it's time to take a look:

The public's opinion of the first lady runs even higher than its opinion of the president, with a 73 percent personal favorability rating for President Barack Obama in a new Pew Research Center poll, and a 76 percent rating for the first lady.

That's not unusual -- first ladies generally don't become ensnared in the political controversies that can weigh on a politician's public image. But this first lady outpaces recent predecessors: At 76 percent, she ranks higher than Laura Bush did in July 2001 (at 64 percent favorable) and higher than Hillary Clinton did in May 1993 (60 percent).

Michelle Obama also is reaching across party lines: 67 percent of Republican women hold a favorable view of her, up 21 percentage points since January.

Just to show what a little vegetable gardening on the South Lawn, a swing set for the girls and a puppy can do to erase the memories of a divisive political campaign: In September 2008, a plurality of Republicans, both men and women, voiced an unfavorable opinion of Michelle Obama.

"In a word," Pew reports, people say this about the first lady: "Classy" (34 people said so in the survey), "Nice/nice lady" (32 said so), "Intelligent" (24 said so), "Strong" (22 said so), "Elegant" (15 said so), "Good" (15 said so).

In a few words of her own, Obama explains it all: "I've worked all my life," she said Thursday, which was Take Your Child to Work Day at the White House. "I've worked in corporate America, I've worked for non-profits and I consider this a very important job. ... I wake up every morning, first of all, making sure that my kids get to school on time and they do their homework."