

Significant others: Does the public have a reason to evaluate a candidate's spouse?

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As John Kerry nailed down his grip on the Democratic nomination for president, Americans craned their necks for a look at his wife. Teresa Heinz Kerry, who by a previous marriage came into part of the Heinz Company fortune, was a very visible presence at each stop in the marathon of primary contests. The *New York Times* evaluated her political contribution: she “may be both an asset and a liability for his ambitions,” it said, adding that she has “a reputation as being offbeat.”

Earlier in the primary season, the media assessed and dissected Howard Dean’s wife, Judith Steinberg, who apparently violated an unwritten rule of American politics by not campaigning with her husband. Instead, she tended to her medical practice in Vermont.

Columnist Tina Brown reported that Democrats found Steinberg’s “determined invisibility on the campaign trail” to be “deeply weird.” Bowing a bit to that criticism, Steinberg became a bit more visible. For many Americans, however, the fact that she was pursuing her own career and letting her husband pursue his did not seem weird at all. It simply reflected a different kind of marriage—not worse or better, just different.

All this discussion raised the question: Does the public have any good reason to care about a candidate’s spouse at all, or to be interested in the nature of the candidate’s marriage?

People are surely right to hope that a candidate has a strong marriage. The quality of the relationship is one sign of character. It says something about a person that he or she has the tenacity and commitment to make a marriage work.

And a healthy marriage, the psychologists tell us, involves some level of self-differentiation—the ability to be close emotionally to someone without relying on that person for one’s identity and self-esteem. In that respect, the Dean-Steinberg marriage seemed an admirable example. (One wishes that Americans were past the point of seeing qualities like “independent,” “professional,” “strong-willed”—and even “offbeat”—as liabilities for a female spouse.)

At the same time, the quality of a marriage is not something the public is well positioned to judge. After all, only the partners know the nature of the partnership. To respect marriage, then, means finally respecting the privacy of marriage and the particular choices the partners have made. Making the candidate’s spouse an issue inevitably leads to making a superficial assessment, or else to insisting that the spouse conform to an ideologically defined role, whether “feminist” or “traditional.”

When it comes to candidates’ spouses, then, the appropriate thing is to look, but then look away. The public’s job, after all, is to choose the candidate. Let the candidate choose the spouse.