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First Families on the Trail

Do families typically campaign with presidential candidates?

Americans are accustomed to seeing presidential candidates with an adoring wife and children at their side. That old country saw, "Stand by Your Man," could be the media handlers' theme song. Actually, the custom of taking the family out on the campaign trail is not as old as Americans might think (which is why your question is a good one).

In the nineteenth century, presidential candidates usually did not campaign on their own behalf; their wives didn't campaign for them either; which is not to say that spouses were indifferent. Mary Todd Lincoln was known to be ambitious for her husband and "found the presidential campaign tremendously exciting and the outcome highly gratifying ... and her husband's triumph satisfied her heart's desire."^[1]



Sometimes spouses were dragged into a presidential contest unwillingly. In the 1888 campaign, Grover Cleveland's young wife inadvertently became involved when Republicans attacked her husband and she felt honor-bound to defend him. Opponents were calling Grover the "Beast of Buffalo." They charged that he frequently got drunk and beat his wife. Frances Folsom Cleveland vigorously denied the charge. Just 23 years old (an exceptionally young first lady), she had been married hardly two years. She issued a statement that called the mudslinging "a foolish campaign story without a shadow of foundation." Indeed, she wished "the women of our Country no greater blessing than that their homes and lives may be as happy, and their husbands may be as kind, considerate, and affectionate as mine."^[2]

About as public as wives and children got in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century campaigns was to sit with the candidate on the front porch of their home or pose for photographs.

The custom of a spouse going out on the campaign trail with her husband, and staying on the campaign trail for any length of time, is less than one hundred years old. The first wife of a presidential candidate to make an extended campaign tour with her husband was Mrs. Charles Evan Hughes, in the 1916 contest that pitted her husband against the incumbent Woodrow Wilson. Presidential historian Paul F. Boller writes,

She added charm and zest to her husband's campaign and helped keep his spirits high. As she sat at a tiny table in the train pouring grape juice for newsmen, Hughes tenderly waved his hand toward her and said: "Gentlemen -- the greatest asset of the Republican party!"^[3]

Wilson's wife, by the way, also played a prominent role in the election of 1916 -- but not necessarily the one she wanted. Wilson's first wife had died in 1914 while he was in office. He married Edith Galt just one year later, with a whiff of scandal since post-Victorian society expected a longer period of mourning and courtship.

By the Roaring Twenties it was not unusual to see wives campaigning with their husbands in open automobiles, and by 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt was taking his wife Eleanor and their children by train on multi-state speaking tours. Harry S. Truman did the same on his famous whistlestop tour in 1948.

In the 1952 campaign, Richard Nixon delivered his famous "Checker's speech" before a live television and radio audience to save his spot on the Republican ticket as Eisenhower's running mate. Ethical questions had arisen over Nixon's use of a private fund, and many Eastern Republicans were joining Democrats in calling for him to get off the ticket. It was make-or-break time. One of Nixon's goals, as historian Garry Wills has pointed out, was to demonstrate that "He is just like all the rest of us, only more so." Nixon's effort succeeded because of the skillful way he wove his family through the speech. One of the high points of the performance occurred when he mentioned a cocker spaniel puppy that had been given to his two daughters. "And our little girl, Tricia, the six-year-old, named it Checkers. And the kids love the dog and ... regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it."^[4]

Sometimes there is more going on than meets the eye. Everybody has seen film clips of Jacqueline Kennedy with her husband John F. Kennedy on the day he was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963. The reason Kennedy was in Texas was to campaign. The '64 election was less than a year away, but it would be tough for the Democratic ticket to win the South due to Kennedy's stand on civil rights. Jackie detested campaigning, but she was a political asset to her husband and agreed to go with him on the campaign trail. It was not just for political reasons, however, that she went to Texas. One of the poignant things about the footage of her in the pink suit and pillbox hat was that she and her husband had lost their newborn baby, Patrick, just three months before. They wanted to be close as a couple; they were still grieving.

Nancy Reagan was a constant presence in Ronald Reagan's campaigns in 1980 and 1984. Her adoring gaze and broad smile sometimes elicited sneers from political opponents, but she conveyed absolute loyalty to and admiration for her husband. Over time her image was backed up by action: she steadfastly and courageously cared for her "Ronnie" during the ten years he suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

Barbara Bush's presence was formidable during her husband's 1988 and 1992 campaigns. She projected the image of a kind but strong grandmother who wasn't afraid to speak her mind. So often did she appear in her favorite color that Americans became familiar with "Barbara Bush blue." In fact, they had a better idea of what she wore than what George H. W. Bush wore. Her clothing also gave her opportunity to express self-deprecating humor. "One of the myths is that I don't dress well," she said. "I dress very well -- I just don't look so good."

One of the most striking media appearances in living memory occurred in 1992 when Hillary Clinton went on the TV news magazine *Sixty Minutes* with husband Bill to show the couple's solidarity amid charges that he had been unfaithful to her. It was a painfully intimate moment, but one that proved the value of having a supportive spouse in a close election.

Another striking media appearance occurred in the 1996 campaign, when Elizabeth Dole, the wife of candidate Bob Dole, conducted a town-hall style event that seemed fresh and spontaneous. She roamed the hall, working the audience with ease. There is little doubt that her performance boosted the image of her husband.

George W. Bush has skillfully used his mother's popularity to make him a stronger candidate. He is constantly using self-denigrating humor that reveals how Barbara Bush approves or disapproves of her son's actions. Both in 2000 and 2004, Bush has also benefited tremendously from his wife, Laura, who has proven to be a skilled campaigner and fund-raiser in her own right.

So in contrast to the custom just one hundred years ago of keeping a low profile, it is now routine for spouses to campaign alongside the candidate. The primary reason for the change has been the development of mass media. Photography, motion-picture newsreels, television, the Internet -- all have made a huge impact on the way in which candidates campaign. The images these media disseminate can reach millions of viewer-voters. Media handlers want a candidate to project a strong personality that conveys optimism and hope. They want their guy to look like Everyman. It helps if the American people see the candidate with an ever-smiling wife and well-scrubbed children. For that reason families have become indispensable to modern campaigns.

(Question from Natalie C. of Grand Rapids, Michigan)

^[1] David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 270.

^[2] Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 157-58.

^[3] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

^[4] Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (New York: Signet, 1969), p. 140; David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 32-35.