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Please Welcome the Next President ... and Her Handsome Husband

The presidency has been a "highly masculine" office. So what's a husband's role on the campaign trail?



AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand at home in Washington with her husband, Jonathan Gillibrand

Mini Racker

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It isn't that venture capitalist Jonathan Gillibrand is avoiding the campaign trail; last month, he could be found sitting next to his wife, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, in a New Hampshire diner, talking with voters. But like most of 2020's political husbands, he has avoided the spotlight.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren's husband, Bruce Mann, made a rare campaign appearance on Sunday, accompanying the senator to Memphis. The Harvard law professor also appears in her launch video, though viewers who aren't watching closely could miss him. While Warren's voice-over highlights her children and parents, she doesn't directly acknowledge Bruce.

And anyone attending Sen. Amy Klobuchar's snowy campaign launch could easily spot her husband, law professor and death-penalty scholar John Bessler. As she prepared to speak, it was Bessler who brought her notes onstage and laid them on the podium.

These men support their wives quietly. They aren't active on social media. Even political junkies who follow the race struggle to remember their names.

But gender-related concerns contribute to the husbands' peculiar invisibility relative to previous campaign spouses.

"Right now, the women are trying to be introduced," said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. "I think that we still live in a traditional enough society that if you're announced in terms of your spouse, it will diminish your profile."

According to Kelly Dittmar, a political science professor at Rutgers, political wives have historically had many reasons to speak out. They can humanize their husbands and endear them to female voters. Their speeches can also emphasize the stereotypically masculine qualities that voters often have looked for in presidents, such as protectiveness and stamina. That won't work for political husbands.

“We're talking about, at the presidential level, a highly masculine office,” Dittmar said. “So to the degree that a male spouse is part of the conversation, the concern is: Do folks start to assume that he has more influence than they would if a female spouse was active on the campaign trail?”

In a 2015 Democratic debate, Hillary Clinton tried to turn that concern into a selling point. She said she'd turn to her ex-president husband "for special missions, for advice, and, in particular, how we're going to get the economy working again for everybody, which is something he knows a little bit about." She added that Bill would not be picking out the flowers and china for state dinners. As the wife, that would still be her job.

Unlike Bill Clinton, this cycle's potential first gentlemen are likely to encounter conflicts between Americans' expectations for men and their expectations for political spouses. When Dan Mulhern became Michigan's first gentleman in 2003, he felt this tension strongly.

Soon after his wife, Jennifer Granholm, was elected governor, he sought guidance from one of the state's former first ladies. Her response had a lasting impact on how he thinks about the role a first gentleman should serve.

“She said, ‘Well, your primary role is emotional,’” Mulhern recalled. “I think that’s absolutely true. And men of my generation, my father’s generation—even, to some degree, my son’s generation—men were not socialized to be emotional-support players.”

In a culture where men are still often seen as the breadwinners, political husbands also face career challenges.

“The changing role for men doing this is how many of these candidates’ spouses are full-time working people—will they put their business on hold, the way, for example, Heidi Cruz did when Ted Cruz was running for president?” said Anita McBride, who served as chief of staff to Laura Bush. “Will they temporarily interrupt their lives to be an active participant in the campaign?”

“I think people will be very interested to see who the spouses are,” she added.

Laurel Elder, who coauthored the book *American Presidential Candidate Spouses*, has found this to be the case in the past. According to her team’s 2017 survey, 68 percent of Americans think it’s important to see spouses actively campaigning, which can quickly become a full-time job. Barack Obama, for instance, launched his campaign in February 2007. By May, Michelle Obama had cut her working hours by 80 percent.

Several of the campaign husbands have careers that can take a backseat to those of their partners if necessary, something that has long been expected of wives. Abraham Williams, for example, is a freelance cinematographer. While his wife, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, has often been the star of the show, Williams is behind the camera. His online portfolio features portraits of the congresswoman smiling on a surfboard, standing in uniform, and surveying fire damage alongside emergency personnel. In 2016, he served as director of photography for one of her campaign spots.



📷 Sen. Elizabeth Warren and her husband, Bruce Mann AP PHOTO/BILL SIKES



📷 Mayor Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten, greet a young supporter at the South Bend, Ind., St. Patrick's Day Parade on March 16. TWITTER PHOTO

Even Chasten Buttigieg's job as a middle-school teacher, a role that could require a strict, grueling schedule, sometimes allows him to work from the road so he can travel with his husband, South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg. Of the six husbands to candidates in the field, Chasten embraces the traditional responsibilities of campaign spouse most publicly. He shares photos of the couple's smoothie dates and board-game nights. He tweets about the administrative tasks he handles in the household—picking new drapes, making Target runs, taking down the Christmas ornaments, doing laundry. He even has practice as a surrogate; when Pete had to skip a Halloween event in South Bend, it was Chasten who handed out candy and took photos with costumed kids.

But despite his often lighthearted comments, he appears hyper-aware of the weight of his role.

Recently, one Twitter user emphasized how important it was to him, as a gay person, to see Chasten publicly supporting his husband.

“Trying to be exactly who I needed to see when I was that closeted, terrified 14-year-old,” Chasten responded.

But if there’s one potential first gentleman who stands out to political insiders, it’s Sen. Kamala Harris’ husband, Douglas Emhoff.

“My husband is one of the most supportive people you’ve ever met,” Harris recently told Jimmy Kimmel. “He’s very much enjoying being the spouse—he’s very secure.”

Emhoff’s enthusiasm is apparent on Twitter, where he retweets media coverage of his wife and gushes over her success. He also sends fundraising requests to Harris’ email list. On Valentine’s Day, he sent one filled with photos of the couple’s family life and signed it “xoxo, Doug (Kamala’s hubby).”

One political strategist said that, regardless of gender, candidates’ spouses tend to do well when top staff have cultivated relationships with them. This may work in Emhoff’s favor, the strategist noted, since many of Harris’ staffers have worked with her for a long time and have gotten to know Emhoff over the years.

Should Emhoff, or any of the other political husbands, become the country’s first first gentleman, he will update one of the most archaic roles in American public life.

“The expectations are going to be different,” Elder said. “Because if people even think about treating a man the way that they’ve treated first ladies, they laugh.”

Connie Schultz, a writer and journalist married to Sen. Sherrod Brown, who decided not to run for president, is looking forward to the change.

“There’s not going to be speculation that they can’t have a career—it’s how they’re going to balance it, which is so different from the women,” she said. “Just think about some of the stuff that we ask women. I doubt that we’re going to want to know who designed their suit at the inaugural.”