

Love in short supply for political spouses

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Political spouses increasingly are finding little public love to go with marriage.

The husbands and wives of elected officials long have been considered fair game, especially those in high-profile, high-paying jobs. But now, with the rise of bloggers and the march of 24-hour news, they've never been more visible - or as vulnerable to the rough and tumble of the campaign.

Consider Jackie Clegg Dodd, wife of embattled five-term Democratic Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut.

Republicans have been criticizing her for the \$400,000 a year she earns as a director of several corporate boards, with the state GOP chairman questioning whether she got the posts because of the political clout of her husband. The senator is chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and facing his toughest re-election fight in 2010.

The charges came despite Mrs. Dodd's background as the former vice chairwoman and chief operating officer of the Export-Import Bank of the United States and her decade of experience working as a staffer on the Senate Banking and Appropriations panels.

Her infuriated husband cried foul.

"That is a flat-out lie and it's low-blow politics at its worst," Dodd complained in a recent Hartford Courant op-ed piece. "It is despicable that the Republican chairman would be lying about my wife's background and unfairly attacking her."

Jackie Dodd serves on the corporate boards of video rental company Blockbuster Inc., assisted living facility operator Brookdale Senior Living Inc., CME Group Inc., which is the parent company of the Chicago Board of Trade and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange; and pharmaceutical makers Cardiome Pharma Corp. and Javelin Pharmaceuticals.

She hired an ethics counsel to ensure there were no conflicts with her husband's Senate work before agreeing to take the posts.

"You're going to see these kinds of conflicts more and more in families where both spouses work," said Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a government watchdog group. "High-powered people are often likely to be married to other high-powered people."

After a Courant story last month detailing Jackie Dodd's corporate posts, Connecticut Republican Party Chairman Chris Healy pounced.

"You don't become a board member with this thin a resume unless you know someone," Healy said.

While cautioning that political couples in general need to be careful to avoid conflicts, Sloan said Dodd's wife has "some pretty good qualifications to be a corporate director."

The Dodd flap comes on the heels of a 2008 presidential campaign where spouses faced criticism over various issues.

Conservatives questioned Michelle Obama's patriotism for her remarks about being proud now to be an American, prompting her husband's blunt "lay off my wife" warning to critics. Democrats ripped into Cindy McCain, wife of Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain, for failing to release tax returns showing her vast wealth. She eventually relented.

Former President Bill Clinton sparked an uproar when he said Barack Obama's opposition to the Iraq war was a "fairy tale." Clinton's rants against Obama on behalf of his wife during the primaries were so intense that Obama quipped to Hillary Rodham Clinton, "I can't tell who I'm running against sometimes."

When Indiana Sen. Evan Bayh was seen as a possible running mate for Obama last year, there were questions about Bayh's potential conflicts of interest because of his wife Susan's service on several corporate boards.

Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies Library in Canton, Ohio, says the trend toward larger public profiles for political spouses has slowly built since the post-Civil War era, "and certainly since the 1970s when you saw an increase in the independent professional careers of spouses."

"It's not going to go away," Anthony said. "It is a practical reality of public life."

Linda Daschle, the wife of former Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, faced criticism for lobbying the House on behalf of a pharmaceutical company while her husband was in the Senate.

"The more they step out and show independence and have careers of their own ... they get attacked," said Betty Winfield, a political scientist at the University of Missouri. "If she had stayed home and been the traditional wife, keeping the home fires burning and having dinner on the table, then in this climate, she might have been criticized for that."