THE POLITICS OF FASHION:
AMERICAN LEADERS AND IMAGE PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Physical appearance is an important non-verbal communicator for public officials, as they are often in the public eye. As a result, one’s fashion and style can affect one’s political viability. All politicians are expected to dress in a certain way, a style that former Democratic National Committee Communications Director, Karen Finney, believes “conveys a degree of thoughtfulness and seriousness,” (Personal Interview, 2009). These expectations are merely guidelines to attire that demonstrates the correct balance between masculinity and femininity, between paying attention to detail while appearing effortless, and maintaining one’s personal character. Case studies, personal experience, and personal interviews with Karen Finney, Anita Dunn, Peter Kovar, Tim Gunn, and Rochelle Behrens illustrate the importance of what public officials wear. Secretary Hillary Clinton, Governor Sarah Palin, Congressman Barney Frank and Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez are used as examples to demonstrate key points. Among the key findings, it is found that female candidates on the campaign trail continue to struggle with social permission to don casual attire. As well, while it is important to maintain a “gender appropriate” image, Hillary Clinton
demonstrates how women often perform their political roles through their clothing.

KEY WORDS: fashion, style, clothing, gender appropriateness, performativity, viability, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Loretta Sanchez, Barney Frank, Tim Gunn, Karen Finney, Anita Dunn, Peter Kovar, Rochelle Behrens
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INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER ONE | INTRODUCTION

"Fashion is always other people." - Gilles Lipovetsky

The topic of fashion in politics has become increasingly relevant. Political style has seeped into the rulebook of campaign communication and has become a nonverbal element that can often be as important as what a candidate says and does. Rarely does a politician appear unkempt or unprofessional. Yet, what does dressing professionally actually entail for political leaders? An unofficial dress code seems to have evolved over time, a socially mandated uniform that is continually evaluated and revised by the media. In this thesis, I will analyze the significance of fashion and clothing in perhaps one of the most official of work places—government.

Politicians are expected to dress in a certain way, a style that former Democratic party Communications Director, Karen Finney believes “conveys a degree of thoughtfulness and seriousness,” (Personal Interview, 2009). These expectations are merely guidelines to attire that demonstrates the correct balance between masculinity and femininity, between paying attention to small details while appearing effortless, and maintaining one’s personal character. As Washington, D.C. fashion designer Rochelle Behrens puts it, "If you care too much about your appearance, then you don't care about saving the world," (“Lobbyist-Turned-Designer”). In the same way, I would argue that those who do not put enough effort into their appearance could also send a similar message of carelessness.
Physical appearance is an important non-verbal communicator for public officials, as they are often in the public eye. Watching CSPAN can sometimes feel like experiencing a political catwalk. Back and forth from politician to politician on the floor of the House or the Senate, the viewer sees not only representatives from every state, but also gets a feel for the personality of each political leader through his or her charismatic speeches as well as what he or she chose to wear that day.

For instance, one would notice if a congressman was not wearing a tie, a standard piece of the white-collar uniform. To some, a politician without his tie may appear more casual and approachable while to others he may appear unkempt and unprofessional. The way in which one perceives these visual clues, like the absence of a tie, also depends on other factors such as age, gender and level of office. These factors contribute to the translation of one’s style and the distraction not wearing a tie may cause. Above all, an instance such as a politician sans tie can change the perception of a candidate for better or worse.

Though the tie is a fundamental element of professional attire, it is important to note that it is part of a uniform created solely for men. It is not my intention to create an analysis defending the hardships of women in the workplace. Yet, the attire worn in almost any business atmosphere demonstrates the clear discrepancies between men and women, as well as women among women. A standard uniform has been put in place for men in the business world—a suit and tie. Women, however, were not initially permitted into
the workplace as equals. It was not until World War II that women began to take
the positions traditionally held by men and it was not until this time that women
began to wear pants. Furthermore, it would be untrue to say that men are
limited in attire, that they cannot dress uniquely. Nevertheless, research has
found that female politicians still receive the brunt of media ridicule when it
comes to attire and that clothing often becomes the focus of their media attention
while their words and actions go unrecognized.

**Hometown Inspiration**

After discovering an interest in political communication in college, I
interned in the Orange County, California district office of Congresswoman
Loretta Sanchez (not to be confused with her sister Congresswoman Linda
Sanchez) in early 2007. Perusing the long hall of congressional photographs in
the district office of a congresswoman with whom I had only recently become
familiar, I noticed something curious. In each congressional photograph of nearly
500 people, I could pick Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez out immediately.
Amidst the dark suits that bled into one another stood a bright-colored outfit worn
by California’s 47th Congressional Representative. Some years sporting red,
others pink, and even a bright yellow ensemble one year, Congresswoman
Sanchez was always easy to spot in a crowd.

One of my tasks as an intern was to pull together newspaper clippings of
stories about Congresswoman Sanchez from our local and state newspapers.
One article in particular caught my attention. A piece in the *Los Angeles Times*
by Ashley Powers entitled, "For Rep. Sanchez, a hot-tomato label means a hot potato" discussed many aspects of Congresswoman Sanchez's character and persona, including her St. John labeled clothing and her "come hither" heels, (Powers, 2007). The article was a discussion of the back and forth of being Loretta Sanchez, about the fact that many take pride in her boldness in dress and character while others chide her for her overly flirtatious nature and her inability to pass any important legislation.

I knew Congresswoman Sanchez was a heart-felt politician. She was definitely more outgoing and colorful than I thought politicians were, but I knew that she also worked very hard at her job. While I interned at her office, the congresswoman traveled to Iraq to visit with soldiers and to Vietnam to visit with the wives of men imprisoned for no lawful reason. She also flew back and forth each weekend from Washington, D.C. to Orange County to complete work in her district as well as to take turns with her siblings caring for her father who suffers from Alzheimer's. I knew Congresswoman Sanchez took her job very seriously and I could not believe that there were people in the world who would rather discuss the color of her dress than discuss the wives of the prisoners she consoled in Vietnam.

My opinion on the subject has shifted somewhat since then. While I personally understand that there is much more to a politician that her or his clothing, I do know that what someone wears sends a nonverbal message that can distract or enhance one's motives. Much research has been done at a
journalistic level regarding fashion, however little has been accomplished from a scholarly approach. This is not to say that the academic books that have been written or the studies that have been conducted have not fulfilled an important purpose. As the ranks of politicians diversify and become filled with more than just older white men in a suits and ties, the color of one's outfit to the color of one's skin bring about visual clues of change never seen before in the realm of politics. Additionally, with the election of Barack Obama, a young, culturally adept president comes a wider and more public interest in politics, fusing the borders of political and popular culture. If fashion ever had an important role in politics, that time is now.

**Multi-method Approach**

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the affects of fashion and style in politics. It will serve as a fashion manual for those currently serving in public office, those aspiring to work in politics, and those fascinated by the implications of fashion in politics. Chapters two and three will outline the theoretical framework of the research conducted and data collected. Chapters four through seven each offer profiles on elected officials’ style, case studies on the historical impact of clothing in political campaigns and careers, the theoretical implications of fashion in politics, and the insightful opinions of political communication and fashion experts.

The following chapter will outline the methodology used for data collection and introduce the individuals interviewed for this study. A broad array of subjects
participated in my research, including political communication experts like Karen Finney and Anita Dunn and fashion gurus such as Tim Gunn and Rochelle Behrens. The range of expertise from the political realm to the fashion world offers insight from several perspectives and culminates in diverse conclusions regarding the affects of attire in politics. Furthermore, “fashion,” “style,” “appearance,” and “viability” are terms that are used heavily throughout this thesis. Concluding this chapter, I lay out clear definitions of these terms, both incorporating past explanations and my personal perspective.

The third chapter is a review of the theoretical works used to analyze the role style and appearance play in communication. Clothing and other elements of one’s appearance are important non-verbal communicators and thus become as important as verbal communication in politics. Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity,” the importance of “gender appropriateness” in political campaigns and careers as discussed by Bystom et al., Ruth Mandel’s concept of the “right image,” and Alison Lurie’s views on clothing as a language demonstrate the relevance of physical appearance in politics, specifically in relation to gender and public office.

Chapter four looks at gender performativity for female leaders by profiling perhaps one of the most intriguing cases of style in politics. Hillary Clinton’s wardrobe has evolved from year to year and from public role to public role. As First Lady, New York Senator, national candidate for the Democratic nomination and Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton’s style has seen some significant changes.
Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity” is used to analyze this evolution, more specifically during her national campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Most significantly, it is found that women perform their political role by dressing to each part, while men’s suit and tie remain the same.

Men have dominated the political landscape since 1776, and as a result find more leeway in the way they present themselves on the campaign trail. Chapter five will discuss the dilemma of dressing casual and how women are often prohibited from altering their professional image. In addition to looking at the evolution of Hillary Clinton’s clothing in chapter four, her grueling 2008 campaign against Barack Obama is analyzed in this chapter in order to highlight the casual attire discrepancies among genders in politics.

Chapter six will take a look at the significance of embodying the “people’s candidate” when running for office. The chapter will begin with a profile on Sarah Palin, a political icon during the 2008 Presidential election, and a trendsetter that demonstrates the weight of a relatable image. Though Governor Palin caused much stir when it was found that the Republican Party paid an exorbitant amount of money for her personal upkeep, in many ways her pricey style also highlighted the importance of personal appearance and the ways in which one can relate to her or his constituents by the way she or he dresses.

Focusing on local politics, chapter seven investigates distracting attire and the importance of maintaining a look that translates well locally and in wider political landscapes. Both Barney Frank and Loretta Sanchez are analyzed using
Alison Lurie’s idea of appearance as a “completed sentence.” As well, each politician’s appearance is evaluated on its ability to translate beyond Congressional district borders.

To conclude, the top advice offered by those interviewed is compiled into a list of the “Top Dos and Don’ts.” As well, the limitations and hardships faced while conducting research are also revealed and discussed in this final chapter. While discussion of fashion within politics seems to be taboo, this study reveals a better understanding of its significance and an invaluable guide to style for political leaders.
METHODOLOGY
CHAPTER 2 | METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Clothing and physical appearance are crucial nonverbal communicators for politicians. In order to collect data on the effects fashion and style have on political campaigns and careers, people involved in relevant campaigns were interviewed. As well, experts in the fashion world were interviewed in order to gain their perspectives on style in Washington. With the combined data from both the political and fashion realms, interesting conclusions on topics concerning political image and appearance developed.

Besides the individuals interviewed and introduced below, several politicians were asked to participate in this study. They include but are not limited to Hilda Solis, Sarah Palin, Adrian Fenty, Rosa DeLauro, Loretta Sanchez, Carolyn Kilpatrick, Donna Edwards, Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, Madeleine Albright, Jane Harman, David Dreier, Patty Murray, and John Campbell. I sent formal letters to Patty Murray, Carolyn Kilpatrick, Donna Edwards, and Rosa DeLauro, as I felt their participation in particular would be very beneficial to my topic. I received rejections in one way or another from the offices of Hilda Solis, Sarah Palin, Adrian Fenty, and Rosa DeLauro. Herseth Sandlin and Sanchez’s office asked for more information and after much follow-up, never responded. All other offices received follow-up in one communicative form or another, but I never received a response. (In the methodological appendix, all materials used for interviews can be found, including formal letters sent to political
representatives, interview questions for each subject, and the pictures critiqued in some of the interviews.)

In the sections to follow, experts interviewed are introduced along with sample topics from each interview. Clear definitions of key terms are then presented, integrating both historical concepts and empirical understanding. (For more information on specific questions, responses and visuals used please see the methodological appendix.)

The Experts

Karen Finney

Karen Finney is an expert when it comes to political communication, especially in regards to women. In 1992, she began her work as Deputy Press Secretary to First Lady Hillary Clinton. She became Hillary Clinton’s press secretary during her successful run for Senate in 2000. During the 2004 Kerry Democratic presidential campaign, Finney joined as Director of Communications for Elizabeth Edwards. She then came on as Director of Communications at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) under Howard Dean in 2005, helping shape the Democratic message throughout the successful 2006 and 2008 Congressional and 2008 Presidential elections. Finney left the DNC in March of 2009 to become a private consultant.

As an intern in the communications department of the DNC during the tail end of the 2008 Presidential election, I was in awe of Karen Finney’s incredible aptitude for advising others on how to communicate as well as how effective she
was as the Democratic Party’s spokesperson. I made it a point to watch her each time she appeared on TV, usually via the DNC’s satellite studio on cable news networks such as FOX News, CNN, and MSNBC. She was always mentally and physically prepared, throwing proverbial punches at her unsuspecting Republican counterparts without a hair falling out of place. She always looks immaculate on camera but never distracting, demonstrating that she understands the importance of image on television and how to use it to her advantage, never letting it communicate louder than her sharp intellect.

Ms. Finney was my first interview, and in many ways a test run for developing my interview format. I was fortunate to have an hour to speak with her about her work with Hillary Clinton and her opinions about on-camera dos and don’ts. A few weeks after the interview, I accompanied her to an appearance on CNN’s The Situation Room where I was able to experience first hand the behind-the-scenes elements of visual prep, including hair, makeup, set staging, and camera angles. I remember watching Ms. Finney’s hair being styled and makeup done. The entire process took about 20 minutes, an average amount of time according to Finney. Within the time it took her to be made ready for camera, two men were also prepped with time to spare. It was evident that even for political spokespeople, the preparation of one’s public image varied greatly by gender.
Tim Gunn

From the time I knew what the topic of my thesis would be, I knew I wanted to talk to Tim Gunn. He had done several projects with Newsweek and Time, critiquing the style of the presidential candidates, running mates, spouses, and families. As well, I knew that Gunn was originally from the Washington area and had done some lobbying on Capitol Hill on behalf of design piracy prohibition. His knowledge of fashion as former Dean of Parson’s school of design in New York City, host of Bravo TV’s Tim Gunn’s Guide to Style and fashion consultant on Bravo’s Project Runway, and familiarity with the wardrobe of Washington made it imperative that I talk to him.

I had no common contacts with Tim Gunn, as I had with most of the people I interviewed. One day decided to cold call anyone and everyone. After some research online, I was able to find a contact of someone who knew him. She passed along my email, pleading for his participation in my thesis. Within an hour, Tim Gunn personally emailed me back, graciously accepting my invitation to be a part of my study. A few days later, I headed to New York City and met with Mr. Gunn in his Liz Claiborne office.

For over an hour we went over questions about fashion faux pas and conversations about the relevance of image in politics. I brought in images of political leaders from Adrian Fenty to Sarah Palin and Tim critiqued the style of each individual. As well, he discussed in detail specifics on how to “make it work,” such as appropriate skirt lengths, the necessity of tailoring, the three
essential elements of style (silhouette, proportion fit) and other helpful hints of advice for our nation’s leaders to be explained in greater detail throughout the paper.

*Peter Kovar*

Long before I started writing, I called on the help of a co-worker whose wife is a Member of Congress. The conversation remained off the record; however she gave me several tips on Members of Congress who stood out for their attire. The most fruitful suggestion was that of Barney Frank, as she described a campaign he had run in the early 70s with a slogan that played on his unkempt appearance.

A common contact put me in touch with Representative Frank’s chief of staff who was gave me perspective on Barney Frank’s State Senate “Neatness Isn’t Everything” campaign and other anecdotes of Frank’s famously disheveled appearance. Kovar was only able to give me a few brief minutes on the phone during a Congressional recess period, yet his insight was no less valuable. Most of our conversation was about Frank’s past campaigns and ability to ultimately overshadow his sloppy look on Election Day.

*Anita Dunn*

Beginning her career in the Carter White House, Anita Dunn has continued to have an impact in presidential politics. A top advisor on the Obama campaign, a campaign known for its innovative and influential communication strategy, Dunn now continues her work at the consulting firm Squier, Knapp,
Dunn where she often conducts media training for candidates and Obama Administration appointees.

Dunn discussed the relevance of image in political campaigns and the importance of keeping distracting clothing and elitist attire to a minimum. I was only able to speak in person with her for about ten minutes but was able to garner plenty of useful information as seen in the chapter on relatable candidate images, which profiles Sarah Palin.

*Rochelle Behrens*

Beginning her Washington days as an intern in the George W. Bush White House, Rochelle Behrens went on to become a lobbyist. Interested in correcting the lack of style in the drab and ill-tailored wardrobe most often seen in Washington, D.C., Behrens decided to start her own clothing line aimed at the working woman. Her claim to fame became her collared button-front shirts complete with a hidden button at the bust to keep the shirt from gaping. While these shirts are innovative, they are also a testament to Behren’s comprehension of the importance of image and style for politicians.

As a woman who has worked on Capitol Hill and an entrepreneur in the world of fashion, Behrens understands the taboo that is style in Washington. We looked over the same photos I brought to Tim Gunn and Karen Finney. Behrens offered her opinion on their individual styles and the direction in which she foresees fashion in Washington going.
Definitions

To many, fashion is a concept that illustrates the latest and greatest in attire at any particular time. Most theorists agree that the term "fashion" goes hand-in-hand with the concept of "change", as fashion is constantly evolving and seldom signifies the same thing from year to year. Consequently, fashion's ever-changing nature makes it nearly impossible to establish core and consistent theories on the subject. In fact, fashion theorist Abby Lillethun believes that "a unifying fashion theory has not developed because the very place that fashion exists--with culture--transforms swiftly and continuously," (77). Despite the difficulties with theorizing fashion, theorists do agree that appearance plays a critical role in everyday communication.

Fashion in Washington, DC is not necessarily filling the pages of In Style or Vogue. Yet, there is definitely a certain look specific to Capitol Hill. Former Washingtonian and fashion expert, Tim Gunn, believes that “Washington subscribes to a uniform. You're there, you're in the trenches, so to speak, with the troops, you wear the uniform,” (Personal Interview, 2009). This uniform most likely spawns from an overlying formal tradition in Washington that dates back to the cutaway coats worn in Congress until the early 1900s. While there is no set dress code for government officials, tradition has mandated a uniform to which politicians are expected to adhere.

As well, politicians must demonstrate that they understand contemporary culture. Dressing appropriately is imperative. Though the “correct” way to wear
a suit may be an objective matter, there are certain mainstays that will ensure one always looks his or her best without any distracting factors. Tim Gunn, believes that the best way to accomplish this is by remember three tenets when dressing: “It’s about three very specific elements that need to work together. It’s silhouette, it’s proportion and it’s fit” (Personal Interview). Wearing one’s business attire in an appropriate manner also means demonstrating one’s knowledge of themselves and the world around them. As former DNC Communications Director, Karen Finney reiterates, “People are looking for these visual cues that show you understand what our cultural norms are” (Personal Interview). One way to demonstrate this cultural understanding is to wear clothing that is up-to-date, properly shaped, fitted and proportioned. When this is accomplished, one is dressed appropriately, one can be considered “in fashion.”

I view fashion as a term that exemplifies the current culture in dress. As Lang and Lang suggest, fashion is “an elementary form of collective behavior, whose compelling power lies in the implicit judgment of an anonymous multitude,” (83). In terms of attire in politics, fashion is what is deemed socially correct and acceptable for politicians to wear as perceived by a constituency, contingent on the location, age, and gender of the individual. Style is then a measure by which politicians are sized up to the cultural cues and expectations that determine what is fashionable in that place at the time. One way to determine if a politician has good style is by the type of attention, or lack of
attention, one receives for his or her attire. For most politicians, the goal is to keep attention on their work and not on their wardrobe.

Each politician has his or her own style, good or bad. That style relays a message to every onlooker, including constituents, the media, and his or her colleagues. As Alison Lurie suggests in *The Language of Clothes*, "Pieces of clothing are like words that get put together on a person to form an entire sentence. A large vocabulary communicates particularly well" (12). One’s daily appearance is what constitutes their completed sentence. Each and every factor of one’s appearance, from hair color to the type of shoes one wears can turn a plain black suit into a completed sentence.

Appearance thus determines the viability of a candidate. A candidate is viable if they are electable. A candidate’s message is an important element of campaign, relaying to his or her constituents the reasons why he or she should be elected. From a communications standpoint, campaigns are comprised of messages, verbal and nonverbal. Dorothy Mink believes that "All individuals communicate with the public realm through their clothing" (274). One’s sense of style can send a very potent message.
LITERATURE REVIEW
CHAPTER THREE | LITERATURE REVIEW

As world-renowned fashion expert, Tim Gunn asserts, gender and clothing are two very important factors in first impressions. "The way we present ourselves to the world is a form of semiology. ... Good, bad or indifferent, the first thing I notice when someone walks into the room is, generally speaking, their gender and the next thing I notice is what they are wearing... I, like everyone else, start to make certain assumptions about that person" (Personal Interview).

The mission of this paper is to take a look at the different elements of a candidate’s image and how the fashion and style choices political leaders make can leave a lasting impact on voters. Four central ideas are taken into account when analyzing these politicians and their stories of style: Judith Butler’s “performativity”, Dianne Bystrom et. al’s “gender appropriateness,” Ruth Mandell’s description of “the right image,” and Alison Lurie’s perception of clothing as a language.

While many may see clothing as an expression of gender, Judith Butler believes that we are performing our gender on a daily basis. Referring to Butler’s notion of performativity, Nick Mansfield states,

To be masculine or feminine does not involve giving expression to a naturally developing interior truth. It means performing and representing yourself in sanctioned and expected ways to give the impression that your interior life is organised around the acceptable poles of gendered being... what counts is the correct performance alone, (185-193).
Gender then becomes a system of regulated performances, "built on the correct repetition of behaviors" (191). Clothing is one way in which we perform our gender. However, one’s gender is simply a set of rules that regulate our sexuality and simultaneously restrict any performance outside of the correct gender role. We been disciplined to perform our respective genders according to social code.

Hillary Clinton provides the perfect example of performativity in chapter four, as her wardrobe evolves based on the social role she fulfills. As well, a close analysis of the media’s critique of her wardrobe during the 2008 Democratic primaries reveals what Roseann Mandzuik calls “the power relations inherent in cultural rules and expectations for what constitutes appropriately ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ behaviors” (312). Interpreting Bulter in relation to Hillary Clinton, Mandzuik believes that “the insistence that there is a ‘true’ Hillary Rodham Clinton to be figured out stems from and simultaneously maintains the cultural illusion that there is one central definition that should govern women’s public and private selves” (313). Women are not often permitted to be both public and private as seen in chapter four. Clinton’s inability to waiver from performing her public image is highlighted by the scrutiny she receives for sporting both matronly pantsuits and overly-feminine cleavage.

Dressing not only appropriately, but gender appropriately is a serious issue for all political candidates. Not performing to the expectations of your gender can have a detrimental affect on one's campaign. In Gender and
Candidate Communication, Bystrom et al. point out that "voters have more positive attitudes toward candidates who are portrayed through the media in a gender-appropriate manner" (174). It was not until the early 1990s that a law requiring women to wear skirts in Congress was banished (Givahn, C01). Though women are now permitted and liberally wear pants, this law exemplifies a set of gender expectations about how both men and women dress in politics. According to Bystrom et al., "Voters have more positive attitudes toward candidates who are portrayed through the media in a gender-appropriate manner," (174). The viability of a candidate is often based upon his or her gender appropriate image. Furthermore, Bystrom et al. explain that media coverage negatively affects the electability of female candidates through stereotypical references to their appearance… By focusing on the appearance of women political candidates, the media treat them less seriously than male candidates and distract attention from their issue positions (178).

For this reason, it is imperative that women pay particular attention to the manner in which they dress, as it often becomes disadvantageous for female leaders.

Among many elements that contribute to this image, Ruth Mandel believes that “an important aspect of the female candidate’s credibility has to do with her appearance. Most female candidates… watch what they wear even more carefully that what they eat” (36). When building an image as a candidate, providing the perfect balance of expected qualities is essential. Especially as a woman, it is imperative and yet impossible that women accomplish what Mandel
calls “the right image,” (33). She suggests that the limits on how far male candidates can deviate from the image voters expect are less restrained than they are for females, as there is little question about the qualifications of men as political leaders. Women must prove their integrity by putting forth the perfect balance of gendered qualities in appearance an in action, creating the “right image.”

Alison Lurie offers additional insight into the importance of clothing in our everyday lives. Taking theories from Balzac to Barthes into account, Lurie believes that clothing is a language not unlike English or Swahili. According to Lurie, we use clothes and other body decorations to "define and describe ourselves" (5). Each day one wakes to his or her closet, hosting a virtual vocabulary of clothes and accessories. Lurie believes that we use these pieces to assemble an outfit that becomes a “completed sentence,” communicating our message for the day.

Furthermore, dressing to the occasion, such as wearing business attire to Capitol Hill, "acts as a sign of involvement in [the occasion], and the person whose clothes do not conform to these standards is likely to be more or less subtly excluded from participation" (Lurie, 13). Additionally, Lurie believes that the more significant a social role is, the more likely he or she is to dress for it (16). In other words, for a politician to be perceived as what former DNC Communication Director, Karen Finney, describes “serious and thoughtful,” she or he must dress appropriately to the occasion. This appropriateness is based
on of a set of cultural values that we have created and altered over time to comply with the rules of business attire while demonstrating a knack for understanding contemporary culture.

Our instinct on style, derived from culture, tells us to dress a certain way based on several factors including location, age, and most importantly, gender. It is incredibly difficult to separate the issue of gender from the affects of attire on political campaigns and careers. History has shown us that female candidates and politicians are treated differently than men, from the way they are represented in the media to the way in which constituents perceive their political platforms. While many female politicians may feel that their attire is given more attention than their work, the truth of the matter is that in order to receive quality press coverage at all, both men and women must physically present themselves appropriately on all accounts.
PERFORMING HILLARY

Figure 4.1: Hillary Clinton at National Convention (LosAngelesTimes.com, 2008)
CHAPTER FOUR | PERFORMING HILLARY

Introduction

Hillary Clinton’s career in the public spotlight offers the perfect example of Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of performativity and its relation to politics. An summary of Hillary Clinton’s several roles in politics then follows with a deeper inspection of performativity in her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. A critique of Clinton’s wardrobe as Secretary of State offers the perfect conclusion as a demonstration of Clinton’s ever-evolving performance.

Performativity

The ridicule women face for being both too feminine and not feminine enough exemplifies Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. Butler believes that we perform our gender daily through our actions including through our clothing choices. Most importantly, clothing is to be seen not as an expression of gender, but as Butler contends, *performativity* of gender. By wearing clothing that signifies one’s gender, Judith Butler suggesting that there is an “organizing core” by which sexuality and social roles are maintained in our culture (185). In other words, by performing gender with clothing, one shows that he or she is organized around the accepted and expected roles of gender in our society.

Until the early 1990s, women of the Senate were not legally permitted to wear pants on the Senate floor, a true example of clothing as a mechanism for
performing gender. As times changed, pants on women have become a more or less an accepted aesthetic. Yet, pantsuits in many ways do little to level the gender playing field in politics. As Anne Taylor Flemming suggests in a 1993 New York Times article,

There's a dual apology in these suits… an apology for being strong, assertive and achievement-oriented… also an apology for robust, straight-out female sexuality. And they exemplify society's effort to keep women off balance, to keep them beholden to the new sex-object imagery: male on top, seductress underneath (A21).

Hilllary Clinton’s infamous pantsuits, perhaps acted as an apology for both her lack of feminine and masculine qualities. On the flip side, an instance when she revealed cleavage highlights the unbalanced expectations of gender performance in politics. Both of these issues will be discussed further in this chapter.

Failing to comply with what the public expects of gender appropriateness and thus gender performativity can be detrimental to a female’s campaign. Texas State Communication Studies Professor, Roseann Mandziuk explains in her article “Dressing Down Hillary” that

Fashion becomes a key point of contention when considering whether a woman is performing the intelligible version of her gender, particularly as that woman enters into public spaces, (313).

Matronly, motherly, feminine, coquettish—none of these female roles seemed to mirror Hillary Clinton’s aspirations of leadership. “Leader” has yet to be a role that females can truly conquer at the national level, and thus leaves women like
Clinton struggling to find their place inside the political arena and outside the fashion review. The following sections will give greater detail of the wardrobe triumphs and hardships Clinton has faced over her years in the public spotlight. We will then return to Judith Butler’s performativity and its relation to Hillary Clinton, specifically reviewing Mandzuik’s 2008 article, “Dressing Down Hillary.”

**The Era of *Designing Women***

Perhaps the most intriguing and evolving story of fashion in politics is that of Hillary Clinton. Serving as Secretary of State under President Barack Obama, Ms. Clinton began her role in the public spotlight as the wife of the Arkansas Attorney General and later Arkansas Governor, William Jefferson Clinton. It wasn’t until Bill Clinton's successful run for President in 1992 that Hillary Clinton began to put particular effort into her wardrobe. An early 1993 *People Magazine* article by Elizabeth Sporkin details the beginnings of Ms. Clinton’s style. While pulling together clothes for the 1992 Democratic National Convention with *Designing Women* costume designer, Cliff Chally, Clinton exclaimed, "I've never thought about clothes so much in my life!" (Sporkin, *People*). As her role shifted from First Lady of Arkansas to First Lady of the United States, Ms. Clinton was captured more and more in the public eye. She realized that maintaining an appropriate image was more important than ever.
By 1987 Clinton admitted, "I think being the spouse of a Governor, I have to look good," and by 1992 she had hired on consultants to help her do so (Sporkin, *People*). One of the people she conferred with was local owner of Barbara/Jean Ltd boutique, Barbara Baber, who discussed Ms. Clinton’s fashion roots:

When she first arrived in Arkansas, says Barber, 'she had just gotten out of law school and had not been long in the business world. For a time, she wore little navy suits like lawyers were supposed to 10 years ago. But executive women don't look that way anymore. Hillary always looks beautiful and she wears her clothes over and over' (Sporkin, *People*).
Yet another of the then First Lady's fashion friends at the time, Little Rock designer Connie Fails adds that "She likes conservative suits in colors such as turquoise or jade or red or purple. Sometimes it's hard to find enough color," (Sporkin, People).

In hindsight, the Designing Women era made popular bright colors and the "power suit" which became a staple of female business attire in the late eighties and early nineties. Ms. Clinton was a fashion icon when she first stepped into her public role as First Lady. Yet, her fashion muses from styles so dearly appreciated decades ago do not translate today. Throughout the Democratic presidential primaries, Ms. Clinton continued to wear boxy and bright colored suits and as a result she sent a signal through her clothing that she is out of touch with contemporary culture.

Just Hillary

The Democratic Party's former Communication Director, Karen Finney, worked with Hillary Clinton during her days as First Lady, her run for Senate, and her national campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. When asked about instances throughout her work in politics when appearance became the focus of media attention, Ms. Finney immediately responds, “Can we talk about hair?” (Personal Interview). She recalls an instance while working in the Clinton Administration:

The busiest day in my five and a half years at the White House was when
the President and Hillary had gone to New York for the weekend. She had gone to Frederic Fekkai and he had cut her hair. When the pool caught a picture of her getting off the plane at Andrew's, they realized that her hair was different. The phones blew up over the new 'do'... That's where it really [hit] me. People really pay attention to what you wear and how you look. Women in particular, get a lot more attention than men.

From both the start of Finney's career and the beginning of Hillary Clinton's place in the public spotlight, fashion and appearance proved to be an important factor. As First Lady, Ms. Clinton's communication team had to answer to not only political reporters, but also to the social, entertainment, and health care press.

This trend faded as the former First Lady ran for office. "When she ran for Senate, basically it was just political reporters. For the most part they didn't care about what she was wearing," (Finney Personal Interview). There was, however, one part of Ms. Clinton's appearance that garnered much attention during her Senatorial campaign: her black pantsuits. Jesting at the clothing that had become a media obsession, Ms. Clinton proclaimed on her Senatorial election night in 2000, "We started this great effort on a sunny July morning... 62 counties, 16 months, three debates, two opponents and six black pantsuits later, because of you, we are here," (Rosenberg, Newsweek). Instead of ignoring what the campaign had tried to deem irrelevant, Clinton highlighted the stir her clothing created.

As First Lady, she had been a fashion icon for several years. Running for
Senate, her clothing again garnered attention for a different reason. Later as Clinton ran for the Democratic nomination, the negativity of media attention toward her wardrobe only increased as she continued the pantsuit trend, but in a colorful array that fashion expert, Tim Gunn, calls “an instant route to dowdiness for just about anyone... the easiest way to make a younger woman look old,” (Personal Interview).

When asked about the drastic change between the clothing Clinton wore as First Lady to her Senatorial monochromatic black pantsuits to the colorful ensembles donned during her national campaign, Finney responded,

When she first became First Lady, the thought of her wearing nice black pants to [an event], people freaked. In the Senate campaign, we were trying to get people focused on just Hillary. Versus in the Presidential [campaign]... she had a little more leeway to expand, (Finney Personal Interview).

In the White House, Hillary Clinton had to adhere to a socially expected wardrobe for First Ladies, which favored color and skirts and chided the dark pantsuits she was so used to wearing from her days in law school. As a Senatorial candidate, Clinton’s campaign felt the need to keep the focus “on just Hillary” by having her dress in simple, black pantsuits that left little to be discussed. While she was able to escape media ridicule save for the comments on her black suits, Hillary Clinton had little luck escaping the remarks of the on-looking media and fashion elite during her run for the Democratic nomination.
Finney believes that "As a woman, if something is off such as [the public] doesn't like the color [of your outfit], that becomes as much a part of the story as anything else," (Personal Interview). The colorful choices of Ms. Clinton's infamous pantsuits over the course of the Democratic primaries often became the topic of discussion. While Barack Obama's campaign stops were a source for the media to gain intelligent insight on our nation's biggest issues, for the Clinton campaign, the media’s discussion often left room to analyze her appearance.

Finney suggests that Clinton had the “leeway to expand” her wardrobe
during her 2008 campaign after her years of experience in the public eye. However, while Clinton has been in the national spotlight since the early nineties, she had never run a national campaign. What’s more, never had there been a woman so closely in position to become the next President of the United States. Focusing on fashion, style and physical appearance at this point may have been more important than ever. The next section will focus on how Clinton’s fashion choices were arguably the pitfall of her campaign.

**Democratic Primaries: Pantsuits and Cleavage**

On June 7, 2007, Hillary Clinton stood before thousands of people and as millions more watched her around the globe on television and online. This day, the day she conceded the Democratic Primary race to Barack Obama, Ms. Clinton wore a much darker-hued pantsuit than the bright colors she had been known for wearing along the campaign trail. Her black pantsuits had not made such a public appearance since the days of her Senatorial campaign and career. Perhaps the color of Hillary Clinton’s pantsuit mirrored a state of mourning on this day, for the endless hours she had worked over months and months during a Democratic primary that had now come to an end. Like any candidate, she had wanted to exude a sense of vibrancy along the campaign trail, a characteristic in many ways highlighted by her colorful wardrobe choices. From fire engine red to canary yellow, Hillary Clinton sported nearly every vibrant hue imaginable during the 2008 Democratic primary.
Yet, on June 7th she stood in black, a choice Karen Finney had described as a color used during the Clinton Senatorial campaign to leave the focus “on just Hillary,” (Personal Interview). Though this was the day that Hillary Clinton was to concede her long-winded campaign, this was also the day that Barack Obama was to unofficially become the party’s nominee. The focus of the days prior had been a rigorous attention struggle for Clinton and the days to follow would now focus solely on her longtime opponent.

“In my White House, we’ll know who wears the pantsuits”

The colorful pantsuits Clinton wore along the campaign trail became a topic of conversation for all media, from news anchors to late night television hosts. Her wardrobe had become the brunt of many jokes, and Ms. Clinton seemed to embrace these comments, guaranteeing David Letterman that “in my
White House, we’ll know who wears the pantsuits,” (Letterman). Yet, as Roseann Mandziuk explains in her article “Dressing Down Hillary,” “Her appropriation of the pantsuit discourse easily can be read as a transgressive act that violates the public meaning of ‘pants’ as the residual space of masculine phallocentric power,” (314). In other words, Ms. Clinton may have been attempting to appropriate pants into her everyday attire as part of campaigning in a “man’s world.” Yet, the combination of eccentric color along with the lack of femininity in the cut of her blazer and shapeless pants creates the opposite affect of what Clinton may have hoped to achieve.

While Ms. Clinton attempted to use her wardrobe choices to her advantage, she was not obeying what Gender and Candidate Communication Dianne Bystrom et al. call “gender appropriateness.” Bystrom et al. suggest, “Voters have more positive attitudes toward candidates who are portrayed through the media in a gender-appropriate manner,” (174). Even with brightly hued colors, Clinton’s boxy pantsuits did not spark the femininity cues that her voters were looking for and had expected. Fashion expert Tim Gunn confesses, “While I would certainly vote for the politician based on supporting the issues, I would have felt warmer and fuzzier about Hillary if she had warmed up to some of her womanhood,” (Personal Interview).

Mandziuk details the pivotal wardrobe choices that unfortunately became the central theme of the Clinton campaign. “In an electoral season rife with controversy and tears, two depictions of HRC (Hillary Rodham Clinton) provide
the entry points to mine our continual troubles with gender: pantsuits and cleavage,” (Mandziuk 312]). While Clinton was often ridiculed for the matronly aesthetic her pantsuits provided, she was also chided when revealing her femininity.

Critiqued for not being feminine enough as well as for being too feminine, Hillary Clinton provides the perfect example of the unjust ridicule female politicians face regarding physical appearance. On a hot July day in 2007, Clinton bared a lower cut neckline, a stylistic contradiction to the more covered-up look she normally displayed. A lower-cut black shell tank under a primrose pink pantsuit revealed a relatively small amount of cleavage. What may not have been given a second thought by the Clinton campaign, this small expression of femininity became a larger topic of discussion for days to follow.

Figure 4.5: Clinton’s cleavage still shot (WashingtonPost.com, 2007)
The media, from newspaper blogs to national television had discussed Clinton’s cleavage, suggesting that it was “startling to see that small acknowledgment of sexuality and femininity peeking out of the conservative -- aesthetically speaking -- environment of Congress” (Givhan C01). In a whirl of cultural paradox, Mandziuk explains, “While the pantsuit marks HRC as an inadequately performing female, the visibility of her cleavage instead rendered her unacceptable because of her overt use of sexuality to gain advantage” (314).

When Clinton attempts to stay covered up in a man’s world, she is chided for wearing clothing that makes her appear rigid and matronly. When she opens up and shows some skin, she is reprimanded for being too sexual. Furthermore, this was surely not the first time skin had been seen on the Senate floor, as Givahn had suggested. It was the first time a viable presidential candidate had shown cleavage, the first time a woman was this close to becoming the next leader of the free world.

Conclusion

Figure 4.6: Sec. Clinton Greets Haitian President Rene Preval (State.gov, 2009)  
Figure 4.7: Sec. Clinton greets Department Employees (State.gov, 2009)
As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton’s wardrobe has evolved slightly. She at times is seen wearing pantsuits with a more pan-cultural affect, such as the Asian-inspired asymmetrical fastened high-collared coat in Figure 4.5 and the Mandarin collar featured in Figure 4.6. She has ceased the frequent wearing the bright colors she wore on the campaign trail. Her newest wardrobe transformation demonstrates that Clinton is continually performing a role. As opposed to a male politician whose suit and tie rarely waivers when moving from position to position, Clinton’s wardrobe has evolved significantly, performance after performance.
THE CONUNDRUM OF CASUAL
CHAPTER FIVE | THE CONUNDRUM OF CASUAL

Introduction

Pause for a moment and imagine a politician in causal attire. You might think of someone in a polo shirt and khaki pants and more often than not that person you are imagining is a man. The question of what women politicians can wear to be casual puzzled nearly every person interviewed for this thesis. While the fashion experts could garner ideas as to what they feel is appropriate for females to wear to the tractor pull or the soup kitchen, each agreed that there are much higher expectations for women than men when it comes to dressing down from normal business attire.

This chapter will begin with a case study on the inconsistent expectations of casual between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Democratic primary. The study will highlight the discrepancies between genders by looking at two candidates who at the time were in fairly equal position for the Democratic nomination. The chapter will conclude with a look at what the authorities on communication and style such as former DNC Communication Director Karen Finney and fashion expert Tim Gunn have to say regarding the question of casual for female politicians versus their male counterparts.

Candidate Casualness: A Look at Gender and Identity in the 2008 Democratic Primary

A candidate’s physical appearance is an important and highly monitored factor during campaign season. Most often candidates are seen publicly in
business attire. However, a candidate's clothing is often strategically modified to coordinate with certain events. For example, Barack Obama detoured from his normal suit and tie to don a blue-collared shirt during a visit to farm fields in Guthrie Center, Iowa during the Democratic primary. Drawing on social and local cues, Obama most likely dressed this way to demonstrate his ability to identify with his “blue-collared” supporters when talking with farm workers.

Though the campaign attire of the 2008 Democratic Primary would appear to be no different in comparison with election years prior, the addition of a viable female candidate highlights a discrepancy in politics regarding gender and public image. While female politicians do not traditionally wear the same attire as their male counterparts, Hillary Clinton stayed true to her wardrobe rituals by continually and consistently wearing pantsuits. As Clinton traveled from event to event, her attire was not adapted to the degree of casualness as it was for her male opponent. Despite the fact that Barack Obama was often photographed during the campaign with his sleeves rolled up, without a tie or jacket, wearing bowling shoes, or playing basketball in gym clothing among other more casual activities, Hillary Clinton rarely strayed from her standard pantsuit, no matter what event she attended.
The content of this case study focuses on three contemporary media that draw attention to the inconsistencies among gender and candidate casualness: popular newspaper and magazine images, late night talk and comedy shows, and magazine covers. These three media demonstrate the difference between male and female candidate casualness, revealing Barack Obama’s ability to add a more casual side to his image while Hillary Clinton must maintain a customary business-attired appearance.

*Image Importance*

Political image is most important during primary elections. As Thomas Marshall suggests, “personal qualities are stronger predictors of voter choices during presidential primaries than issues or ideology” (65). Because issue platforms tend to be similar among candidates of the same party, the candidates’ characters tend to be the focus of attention during the presidential primaries (Benoit and McHale, 51). For the first time in history, a female and an African
American were in line to be the Democratic candidate for President of the United States. The visually dividing lines between gender and race made it easy for the media to portray obvious differences between the two candidates. Yet, when it comes to candidate casual attire, the differences between male and female candidates are clear. Susan Carroll and Richard Fox suggest in the introduction to their book, *Gender and Elections*, “Americans have grown accustomed to seeing their male political leaders in casual attire… Yet, never have we seen a picture of Condoleezza Rice or Hillary Clinton outfitted in jogging shorts or dressed in blue jeans or cowboy boots,” (3). Even today, male politicians are often photographed in casual attire while women are not.

In May 2008, *The New York Times* featured a political blog complete with pictures of Obama playing pool on what the author deemed the “‘regular guy who does regular things’ portion of his campaign tour” (Rutenberg, 2008). Other recent photos and video show Obama in sweats playing basketball during campaign breaks or at mediated events. A January 2007 issue of *People Magazine* displayed a photo of Senator Obama emerging from the beach in Hawaii in nothing but swimming trunks (Milbank, A02). One of the only comparable casual media events attended by Clinton shared a similar slew of photographs as she guzzled whiskey shots and beer at a campaign event in Indiana on St. Patrick’s Day. Though the bar had a common and casual aesthetic, Clinton still appeared in her standard, unmodified business attire.
Hillary Clinton did not participate as often as Barack Obama in casual events along the campaign trail. If Clinton were to shed her coat, roll up her sleeves and ply basketball or bowl, society would most likely view this as an abnormal occurrence and what Bystrom et al. regard as not “gender appropriate” (174). The concept of women as leaders has yet to be accepted, therefore allowing little wiggle room for female candidates when crafting their image. Consequently, Clinton’s attire was rarely, if ever, modified when attending a casual campaign stop.

The Effects of Popular Media

Since its first political use in the late 1950s, television has remained the most prominent media source for voters. Because of the viewer’s ability to view a candidate in action on television as opposed to an inaudible, still image, whether bowling or being interviewed, television allows the candidate to be seen “as a person rather than a politician,” (Jones, 26). As a January 2008 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey report details, the public claims to learn most about presidential campaigns from television (“Internet’s Broader Role”). Furthermore, in 2004, 21% of those polled under the age of 30 claimed that they learned something from comedy television shows. While the percentage of people who watch late-night talk shows (e.g. The Late Show, The Tonight Show) remained the same over the last three presidential elections, the percentage of people who regularly learned something from comedy TV (eg.

When Bill Clinton appeared on The Arsenio Hall Show in 1992, political campaign media hit another major turning point. Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama made several appearances on late night talk and comedy shows. During the Democratic Primary, Clinton made several appearances on The Late Show with David Letterman, one visit to The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, and an appearance on The Colbert Report while Obama appeared on each of these shows with the addition of The Daily Show with John Stewart. Clinton’s clothing was never altered to exemplify a more casual image, even in an informal setting such as a late night talk show. She wore a pantsuit on each episode. Senator Obama, however, on several occasions appeared without a tie and his collar unbuttoned. (Since his election in 2008, President Obama has become the first president to ever appear on a late night talk show while in office. He appeared on one of the final episodes of The Tonight Show with Jay Leno on March 19,
In the same way, the type of magazine covers on which the two candidates were featured during the Democratic primary also expresses the incongruity between candidates on the basis of gender. While both candidates were on the covers of numerous political magazines, Barack Obama also dominated the covers of several popular culture magazines, including *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Men’s Vogue*, and *Rolling Stone*. Barack Obama’s appearances on the covers of such magazines demonstrate his ability to switch back and forth from the formal and casual spheres of public life. In other words, Obama is able to play and dress in both political and popular culture, while Clinton is restrained to maintaining one consistent, formal image.

According to an article in *The Washington Post*, Clinton was offered a sitting for *Vogue* in 2008, but she declined the opportunity (Givhan, 2008).
bit of information highlights the fact that Clinton is aware of the consequences of a female politician changing character by posing for a pop culture magazine. The fact of the matter is not that Clinton is not offered the same opportunities as her male counterparts; it is that she cannot participate in the same opportunities as her male counterparts and have a successful campaign. Whereas Obama’s popularity within popular culture may be partially a result of his younger age, men have historically been able to demonstrate public casualness through attire and sporting events while female politicians often receive negative media attention for doing so. With the ability to exist in the more casual, popular media bubble, Obama is able to better identify with a slew of younger voters that Clinton could never achieve.

_The Medium Dictates the Casual Message_

Television, newspapers, and magazines intrinsically uphold messages of their own, separate from pictures or slogans displayed on them. In other words, as Marshall McLuhan claims, “the medium is the message,” (18). For example, the message put forth when Senator Obama appears on the cover of *Time* offers a different message to the electorate than the message given when Senator Obama appears on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Furthermore, in a 1974 study, Larry Kokkeler found that “the channel through which the electorate receives campaign information, the type of message received, and candidate image perception are related,” (Hellweg, 37). Senator Obama is able to demonstrate a
casual image via political and popular media and therefore displays casualness more often and with more ease than his female opponent, Senator Clinton.

Though both candidates are similarly photographed giving stump speeches and participating in other standard campaign events, newspaper pictorials, late night television, and popular culture magazine covers clearly produce messages of informality. Former DNC Communication Director, Karen Finney believes that “The thing about appearance is showing that you understand culture. How we expect the First Lady to look is very different than how we expect a senator to look is very different than how we expect a mayor to look. I think [one of] the biggest faux pas… is if you wear something totally inappropriate for the situation” (Personal Interview). A candidate who is able to properly dress to the occasion demonstrates his or her understanding of cultural cues, and is thus better able to identify with his or her constituency. This casual message environment, however, has historically been dominated by male candidates. What is more, even in a political race as diverse as the 2008 Democratic Primary, female candidates remain bound to a basic, political image while male candidates are socially permitted to gallivant in and out of the formal and informal, the political and pop culture spheres. In the next chapter, the importance of having a relatable image in politics is discussed, looking at the “People’s Candidate,” Sarah Palin.
What the Experts Say about the “Casual Look”

Having worked with Hillary Clinton through many different phases of her political career, Karen Finney knows the ins and outs of appearance in campaigns and careers. On the topic of dressing casual in politics, Ms. Finney agrees that “it is easier for men to do a dress down casual look than women,” (Personal Interview). Finney continues,

I found that the classic thing guys do is a khaki and a shirt. As a woman you can do that, but you look like a boy… One of the hardest things is “neat casual.” But neat casual is particularly hard when you do things like the county fair (Personal Interview).

Even in her years of experience, Finney remains troubled with dressing a female politician in casual attire. She believes it is important for women to maintain femininity when dressing casual, which can often be difficult.

DC fashion designer and former Washington lobbyist, Rochelle Behrens was also stumped on the topic of what women politicians wear to dress casual. Lost in the conundrum of the “casual” question, Behrens confesses, “Women do have to inherently look a little more formal than [men]... I am trying to rack my brain as to what women wear to be casual. It is really very difficult” (Personal Interview). Without an answer to the reason why women are more troubled to find a casual look in politics, Behrens offers some of her expertise.

Having worked in Washington, DC for several years prior to starting her own clothing line, Behrens understands the differences in business and casual attire for women in the political work place. Just as Tim Gunn suggests, Rochelle
believes that a shift dress is a good option. As well, she believes “the answer is the buttoned-down shirt,” (Behrens Personal Interview).

Gunn also believes the button down is the way to go. When asked what he thought the typical casual look for a female in politics is, he responds,

A classic white shirt on a woman, and it could be styled according to her own style and proclivities. I am not suggesting showing cleavage. That would be a no-no. But a V [neckline] is nice and long sleeves, if it is warmer, could just sort of be [pushed] up (Gunn Personal Interview).

Gunn believes that the casual look is not often embraced by female politicians but that “it can be done,” (Personal Interview). He also suggests the following:

A classic shirt can be paired with a khaki skirt or a khaki pair of pants and flats (shoes). A shift dress is a more casual form of dress and most women look great in a shift dress, providing that there is a belt, that you can self-belt it. I think that the shoe has a lot to do with it. A flat, or a mid-height pump, it’s not making the same statement that a stiletto is going to make (Gunn Personal Interview).

In agreement with Rochelle Behrens, Tim Gunn believes that there are classic pieces that women can use to exude a sense of professional casualness. Simple touches such as slightly pushing up long sleeves or opting for flats instead of heels are ways women can achieve a casual look without calling too much attention to their casual appearance.
**Conclusion**

Even when candidate Hillary Clinton decided to throw back a shot of whiskey on St. Patrick’s Day in 2008, she wore her famous pantsuit. Confined to the dress that exhibits them as gender appropriate, women must solely maintain the roles they are trying to fill. If Ms. Clinton were to venture outside of her pantsuits, she runs the risk of not being taken as seriously (e.g. cleavage). Men are able to venture in and out of the popular and political media and the professional and casual spheres, while women are socially not yet totally permitted to do so.
THE PRICE OF BEING THE “PEOPLE’S CANDIDATE”

Figure 6.1: Palin announced as Running Mate (LosAngelesTimes.com, 2008)
CHAPTER SIX I THE PRICE OF BEING THE “PEOPLE’S CANDIDATE”

Introduction

The day Sarah Palin was nominated as the vice presidential pick for the Republican Party, I was closing out my first week as an intern at the Democratic National Committee. My fellow interns and I had been told to show up early that Friday, as the pick was to be announced. All week we had been opposition researching Mitt Romney, Tim Pawlenty, Joe Lieberman and other possible vice presidential possibilities. When I showed up for work that Friday, my supervisor approached me and said, “Forget everything you were doing. It’s Sarah Pah-lin.” I turned to the intern next to me. We exchanged identical looks of complete perplexity and asked, “Who is Sarah Pah-lin?” Even the major cable news networks had mispronounced her name that first day.

A couple deep breaths, a quick skim of Wikipedia.org for information on a woman whose name I discovered to be pronounced “Pay-lin”, and several heated minutes later, the DNC’s live feed cut to a stage fully dressed with McCain campaign regalia and American flags. Within moments there stood a woman like I had never before seen on a national campaign stage. She possessed the finer qualities of a First Lady but with the confidence and conviction of her fellow male conservative counterparts. Her words were stern yet eloquent that first day, and she spoke to the nation in a compassionate manner, as though she was addressing her local community at a PTA meeting. That first day, I believed the Democrats were doomed.
Her first day in the national spotlight, Palin donned a look similar to the rest of her days on the campaign trail. Palin stood before the nation in a very well-tailored black suit composed of a fitted blazer and matching black pencil skirt. She was well tanned, made-up, manicured, and her hair was pulled back in her signature up-do. The most significant elements of Governor Palin’s image that day were her rimless eyeglasses and her oxblood red patent leather Naughty Monkey pumps. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article released within days of Palin’s first national appearance, sale of her three and a half inch heels had soared within days. “At Amazon.com Inc.’s Endless.com shoe unit, sales of the red Naughty Monkey shoes shot up 50%, to thousands of pairs,”
according to a spokeswoman for Endless.com (Byron, et al. 2008). As well, her eyeglasses caused an immediate stir. The rimless frames by Kazuo Kawasaki priced at $375, were on back-order within two weeks of Palin’s nomination (Byron, et al. 2008).

While the popularity of Palin’s accessories demonstrates her star quality and celebrity-like image, they also represent her connection to contemporary culture and her relatability to constituents who appreciated her appearance and could afford to buy items exactly like hers. As Barney Frank’s Chief of Staff, Peter Kovar, suggests, “People aren’t necessarily looking for people who are better than them to vote for,” (Personal Interview). Though her glasses may have been a bit pricier than what the average American pays for his or her frames, a
certain demographic related to her image as shown by the increase in sales. Her shoes, more affordable at just under fifty dollars and designed for a much younger demographic, proved to translate well to an on looking public of young voters and middle aged women who associate with Palin’s youthful twist on a conservative Washington look.

Sarah Palin’s well-polished image did caused chaos for the campaign in late October 2008 when it was discovered that the Republican Party had paid a significant amount of money for her clothing, makeup artist, and hair stylist. However, Democratic communication strategist and top Obama campaign aide, Anita Dunn, admits that “frankly she had great clothes… they didn't hit you in the face and say, ‘I'm really high-end! I'm really high-end!’ She wasn't dressing like that. It wasn't until those bills came out,” (Personal Interview). Nobody questioned Palin’s label choices until it was discovered that she was not paying for her clothing. Once the discovery was made, Palin’s popular image began to fade. She could no longer relate to the average American who could not afford her lifestyle and the celebrity-like qualities took a hit as the less glamorous, inner-workings of her everyday appearance were revealed.

A look at the Governor’s clothing before the campaign reveals a slightly less sophisticated image. In reality, a mother of five, even with an Alaskan Governor’s salary of $125, 000, would not have been able to afford the quality and quantity of clothing and upkeep for which the campaign had splurged. “WardrobeGate” as it was later deemed, took a woman who had become the
people’s candidate using her “hockey mom” image and conservative appeal and revealed a side of Sarah Palin to which people could not relate: the cost of her clothing and thus the price of her identity as the “People’s Candidate.”

**The “Right Image”**

John McCain was known as the “Maverick,” a Vietnam War vet who was ready and capable of running the country. His personal message had a variety of core elements and was more or less effective in defining his image. As Ruth Mandel explains, the limits on male candidates’ images “are less restrictive… because there is less doubt about men’s basic suitability and competence as public leaders” (34). As a woman, Sarah Palin faced many obstacles in defining her multi-faceted image. She had to find the correct balance between feminine and masculine characteristics, a nearly impossible feat resulting in what Mandel deems the “right image.” Mandel explains the elements when balancing this image:

> At issue are such items as her size, shape, manner of dress, facial features and expressions, tone and pitch of voice, and style of self-presentation, as well as the personal and professional history she brings to the podium, (34).

Each of these issues played a part in defining Sarah Palin. Known as a former beauty queen, her size and shape were accepted as such. As demonstrated earlier, Palin’s manner of dress was highly revered by her star-struck constituency. Her middle-America accent and signature wink, as demonstrated
by Tina Fey’s infamous *Saturday Night Live* impression of the beauty queen turned Alaskan Governor, were often mocked. On top of it all, she was often discredited for her inexperience as a mere first-term governor with little to no experience in foreign policy.

Palin’s image became a collage of these assorted elements. A hockey-mom with an agenda, an available woman who was assertive and expressed the core values of her party, Palin was still often marked by her feminine qualities. Stylistically, Palin represented more of a professionally attired beauty queen than a politician. Later when the exorbitance of her wardrobe and upkeep on the campaign trail was revealed, the officious beauty queen image began to overshadow the serious political leader image. With so many floating versions of Palin’s image, in many ways Tina Fey defined Sarah Palin before the McCain campaign could decide on an image.

Next to gender, one of the most important factors to a first impression besides is one’s attire. Mandel adds that “An important aspect of the female candidate’s credibility has to do with her appearance. Most female candidates conscious about their physical images watch what they wear even more carefully than what they eat,” (36). Palin and the McCain campaign were very aware of this fact, and took to prepping Sarah Palin for the campaign each day not unlike a celebrity is made up for the red carpet.
Another example of extravagant image preparation is that of Speaker Nancy Pelosi. It has been rumored that Pelosi visits Washington D.C.’s local Four Seasons Hotel salon each morning to have her hair done before work. In a personal interview, fashion expert, Tim Gunn reacts to his favorite Washington style icon’s morning ritual: “It's disarming to know that, but it underscores what I have always maintained, that she understands about semiotics. She wants to look her best” (Personal Interview). Former DNC Communications Director, Karen Finney had a similar response. She explains, “When you are in the public eye, if [getting your hair done each morning] makes you feel confident and feel good and you’re not worried [about your appearance], than who cares? I think that’ something men don’t understand… unless they are going bald” (Personal Interview).

The extravagance of Sarah Palin’s wardrobe and Nancy Pelosi’s hair styling efforts may seem off-putting at first consideration. However, these two cases also demonstrate the unbalanced requirements of being a woman in the public spotlight. While on the set of CNN’s *The Situation Room* with Karen Finney in March 2009, this imbalance was exemplified more than ever. In the time it took Finney to be prepped for camera, a process that takes on average 20 minutes, two men had their hair and makeup completed.

As Finney insinuates, it is most important that you feel comfortable when in the public eye, doing in some cases whatever it takes, even if it means more
attention and time paid to your appearance. Additionally, Gunn asserts that understanding the importance of semiotics may also take such measures as personal stylists and daily trips to the hair salon. On the one or two days Pelosi has not had time to make it to the salon, “she looked like a disaster,” as one of my co-workers put it.

![Governor Palin with intern before campaign](Todercan.com, April 2008)

Had Sarah Palin been left to her own means to supply her own clothing, the result may have been just as disastrous. Similarly, if she had opted for the out-of-date clothing she had warn over her past political years, the result may
have been just as dreadful (Figure 6.4). As *Post-Intelligencer* writer, Ann McFeatters explains,

> Would it have been better if her image gurus had gone to Goodwill? Among rank-and-file union members, absolutely. Among upper-class Republicans? Absolutely not... In a nutshell, we have the dilemma of the female candidate. Damned if she does. Damned if she doesn’t. She has to look good (hot, in the current parlance). But she can’t spend much money to get there.

Sarah Palin found herself in a situation not often experienced by men. Expected to be a starlet with a firm grounding of foreign policy, a hockey mom with availability to serve the American people, Palin’s image was difficult to secure. As a result, the media defined it for her. In the next section, fashion and political experts offer their opinions on Palin’s appearance and give advice to female candidates who may find themselves in a similar situation.

**What the Experts Say About Dressing the “People’s Candidate”**

Media training expert, Anita Dunn believes, “Where candidates tend to get into trouble, both in terms of clothing and overall appearance, is when they are trying to be something they are not. Which is the same way they get into trouble in their own campaigns” (Personal Interview). Dunn finds that clothing in many cases can portray a sense of elitism and thus emphasizes the importance of being sensitive to how a one dresses as a public officially. Her own advice to her clients is to:
Forget Nordstrom and go to JC Penny's for a while. I think for women, it has been true in the past and is only slowly changing that appearance is, especially for women voters, the prism through which they are seen at least initially. The first impression for women candidates is very appearance driven with a lot of voters in a way it isn't with men (Personal Interview).

For female candidates to find what Mandel calls the “right balance” with their image, it is important to deemphasize any sign of elitism. For women this could be clothing items that are easily distinguishable as highbrow fashion, such as heavy jewelry or a Chanel tweed suit.

Looking at a photo capturing Sarah Palin’s style, fashion expert, Tim Gunn responds “I really don't object. I really don't. I think that there is nothing wrong with women looking sexy and sophisticated. You can look sexy and have it be really inappropriate but I don't see anything inappropriate about this” (Personal Interview, 2009). Gunn did have some objections to Palin’s wardrobe. “My objection was the luxury level of the budget and the fact that she was wearing all of these European designers… what’s wrong with going American?” (Personal Interview). An important point, although most voters may not have been able to decipher the make of her clothes, wearing American designers could have cut the costs of her clothing and been an asset to her image as a true American woman.
Looking at Palin’s skirt in one photo, Gunn steps into the topic of appropriate skirt lengths.

What I found to be the most questionable about her wardrobe is the length of her skirts. For instance, this skirt, I think is just an inch too short. Just in an inch. I have a thing about the knee cap when it comes to women over 25. It’s that the skirt should come to the top
of the knee. It can be as high as the top of the knee, it can be as low as the bottom of the knee. It should never be any lower than that. That's an instant route to dowdiness (Personal Interview).

In reference to the same photograph, Gunn discusses Palin’s boots. While many chided her for her boots, a look not often seen on women in politics, Gunn believes her boots were appropriate. He offers this advice: “When you start getting above the knee especially with a boot like that, it's like Nancy Sinatra singing, ‘These Boots are Made for Walking’” (Personal Interview). Palin made some bold moves with her peep-toe heels and calf-height boots. While many reprimanded her footwear as being too suggestive, she sported the footwear to the approval of fashion experts and shoe-loving women everywhere.

Conclusion

Presenting an appropriate image is a way in which candidates attempt to relate to and identify with their constituents to thus become the “people’s candidate.” Until women are viewed as viable candidates regardless of the way they physically present themselves, there will continue to be a division between a female candidate and her voters. Until women are legitimized as political equals to men, they will continue to strive for the “right image” to reach their voters, and will continually be let down.
WHEN CLOTHING SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS

Figure 7.1: Rep. Loretta Sanchez (OCWeekly.com, 2008)

Figure 7.2: Rep. Barney Frank (Zimbio.com, 2008)
CHAPTER SEVEN | WHEN CLOTHING SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS

Introduction

What do Congressman Barney Frank and Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez have in common? For one, they both serve in the United States House of Representatives. As well, they both wear clothing that is far too tight. On the one hand, Barney Frank has what New Yorker writer Jeffrey Toobin calls an “apparent tendency to buy shirts in his aspirational, rather than his actual” size. On the other hand, Loretta Sanchez tends to dress in a voluptuous manner that Los Angeles Times columnist, Ashley Powers, deems “risqué” and “flirtatious.” Though both are known to be among the more outspoken crowd in Congress, Frank and Sanchez are often criticized for the even louder messages conveyed by their distracting ways of dressing.

This chapter begins with an historical look at Barney Frank’s infamous disheveled look, from his campaigns in the early 1970s to the distraction his attire continues to create today. The following section on Loretta Sanchez provides an example from the opposite end of the distracting attire spectrum, demonstrating the danger of stepping over business attire boundaries. A discussion of Allison Lurie’s notions of semiotics in clothing highlights the messages sent when donning distracting attire. As well, it is crucial that a public leader’s appearance not be distracting so as to maintain an image that translates well as he or she seeks higher office. Lastly, the skilled opinions of political communication media
and fashion experts will be offered in an attempt to offer solutions and alternatives to clothing that does not fit in both the literal and figurative sense.

**Barney Frank**

Aside from his incredible intelligence, knack for artfully speaking his mind, and many faithful years serving Massachusetts’s fourth district, Representative Barney Frank is also known for one other distinguishing factor: his sloppy manner of dressing. When well-respected periodicals like *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New Yorker* feature stories about the popular Member of Congress’s latest political actions, they often cannot help but mention his disheveled appearance. While Frank has loyally and effectively served Congress since 1981, the unfortunate fact remains that his distracting appearance sometimes speaks louder than his intelligent assertions.

This section takes a look at how Barney Frank’s manner of dressing has affected his campaign and political career. To begin, a brief profile of Barney Frank’s style illustrates the famously disheveled image of the seasoned politician. Alison Lurie’s views on the male wardrobe follow, offering insight into the meaning and purpose of the men’s suit and the message men like Barney Frank could be relaying with their clothing. Examples given in a personal interview with Peter Kovar, Frank’s Chief of Staff, demonstrate ways in which Representative Frank’s staff appropriates his unkempt style. As well, Kovar discusses the significance of Barney Frank’s infamous State Senate campaign slogan,
“Neatness isn't everything.” These accounts of Representative Frank’s appearance reveal the importance of limiting distraction in political attire.

_Fashion Profile: Barney Frank_

Barney Frank wears a suit not unlike a 5 year-old boy wears his Sunday best. His hair is often in need of combing and his narrow ties, often printed in a juvenile polka dot or striped pattern, accentuate his rotund figure. His tie is also usually crooked and rarely tied at the same length from day to day. As observed in several images, his shirt is wrinkled and partially un-tucked, sometimes revealing midriff. The later it gets in the day the more wrinkled his clothing becomes. A confidential source discloses that Frank does in fact tend to buy his shirts a size smaller, so as not to appear larger than his actual size. Yet the small size of his shirt tends to uncomfortably pull over his plump mid-section and other areas not favorably accented.
Frank’s collar of choice is buttoned-down, a style that fashion expert, Tim Gunn, suggests “speaks to one’s college days” (Personal Interview). Because his shirt is too small, the collar bows outward when Frank sits, shrugs, or slumps. Overall, Frank adheres to the “uniform” of Washington, but in a very defiant manner. In doing so, he has earned a reputation for having a very unkempt appearance with an erratic personality to match.

*The Incomplete Sentence*

Alison Lurie believes that, “Pieces of clothing are like words that get put together on a person to form an entire sentence. A large vocabulary
communicates particularly well” (12). Barney Frank possesses all of the words to make a complete sentence, but it is often incomplete. His tie is often crooked, his hair uncombed, and his shirt is too tight and often rumpled. One might say that Frank has yet to “dot the Is and cross the Ts” when it comes to the unkemptness of his attire.

Lurie explains, “Male clothing has always been designed to suggest physical and/or social dominance… And whether a man is athletically built or not, [the suit] diverts attention from his physical qualifications and focuses attention on his economic and social status” (15). Because Frank often overlooks the smaller elements of his suit and appearance, details that become the focus rather than the message of power and leadership his suit could be communicating.

Figure 7.4: John Campbell on the House Floor (FoxNews.com, 2007)
There are several good examples of what Lurie describes as a garment that “diverts attention from his physical qualifications” and instead turns the focus to status and leadership. Representative John Campbell (R-California) dons a business suit with ease, creating a completed sentence that leaves no gaps to be filled by the onlooker. Because he not only wears a suit, but wears it correctly, little to no attention is paid to his attire and the media’s focus remains on what he says and does as a leader. In the final section of this chapter, fashion expert Tim Gunn will give advice on how to correctly wear a suit.

“Neatness Isn’t Everything”

Peter Kovar, Barney Frank’s Chief of Staff, does not believe that Frank’s messy look overshadows more important political matters at hand. However, he does know that Frank’s appearance is often a topic of discussion. During a personal interview, Kovar recalls drafting a press release in the late nineties about Washingtonian Magazine’s yearly “Best and Worst of Congress” list that had once again named Representative Frank among the “Smartest” and “Funniest” in the House of Representatives. To add a touch of humor to the press release, Kovar wrote: “[Frank] had expressed concern that he had not also been named best dressed.” Admittedly, Kovar confesses “Even when [Representative Frank] was dressing nicer, he probably wasn't in any ‘Best Dressed’ category” (Kovar Personal Interview).
Representative Frank's appearance has been the topic of public discussion for nearly four decades. When he decided to run for Massachusetts State Legislature in 1973, Frank’s friends and campaign workers urged him to spruce up his unkempt and overweight image. However, “instead of losing weight, cutting his hair or polishing his shoes, he produced a campaign poster,” (Oreskes). This legendary campaign poster, featuring a young, disheveled Barney Frank below a slogan that reads, “Neatness isn’t everything,” now hangs in the Congressman’s Washington office.

Figure 7.5: “Neatness isn’t everything” poster in Rep. Frank’s Washington office (Joanna Rosholm, 2009)
Discussing the infamous campaign slogan that pre-dates his work with Congressman Frank, Peter Kovar explains,

At the time... he had worked in city government up in Boston. He was known as sort of this rumpled guy who didn't worry that much about always being nattily dressed... [The campaign]... embraced [his appearance] conceptually by saying that “Neatness isn't everything”... The idea is of course is that the reason you vote for people is because of what they are going to do and the ideas that they bring. On the other hand ... it was a way of sort of capitalizing on [Rep. Frank’s appearance], sort of neutralizing it as a negative, getting across the idea that he had these other qualities that he could bring to bear (Personal Interview).

While it may appear that an unkempt style worked to Representative Frank’s advantage, the truth of the matter is that such a poster merely “neutraliz[ed] it as a negative.” Kovar is correct in suggesting that Frank has much more to offer than his appearance, including not only his remarkable intellect but also his legislative successes while serving in the United States Congress.

Peter Kovar continues, “To me, the surface-level appearance stuff is separate from the intangible leadership question. It is really [only] an issue when someone first encounters that [politician],” (Kovar Personal Interview). Barney Frank may constantly be rumpled, but he also maintains qualities of leadership to
a degree that few in Congress possess. Though his constituents may be able to overlook his appearance on Election Day, the truth remains that Frank’s staff must take the time and effort to “neutralize” his negative appearance when it is possible to fix the issue from the start.

*Chaos and Carelessness*

Frank’s issues with unkempt clothing serve as a warning for politicians everywhere. Constituents expect a certain degree of tidiness and care when it comes to their political leader’s appearance. A politician’s unkempt appearance creates not only a distraction but also sends mixed signals about his or her qualifications. Washington, DC based lobbyist-turned-fashion-designer, Rochelle Behrens, recalls:

> I covered financial services for a long time and spent so many hearings just watching [Barney Frank]. It was almost distracting, his slob appearance. You know that he is incredibly bright and effective, but it is hard to really internalize that when you are looking at a man who is disheveled all the time (Personal Interview).

Barney Frank is known for his leadership qualities that make it easy for his constituents to re-elect him year after year. Yet, the fact remains that his disheveled appearance often makes it on the short list of his defining characteristics. No matter how many years one may have served or how highly
regarded a leader may be, one's clothing can cause distractions that can overshadow the words of even the most intelligent politicians.

**Loretta Sanchez**

Loretta Sanchez has served central Orange County in Congress for nearly ten years. Her devotion to Orange County is highlighted by the fact that she has spent most of her life there. She is known for her vivacious and flirtatious manner, a personality that often matches her wardrobe. She has been scrutinized by the media and her colleagues for not dressing in a more traditional manner. Sanchez often wears fitted skirts that reveal her curves and sports footwear that the *Los Angeles Times* label “come-hither heels,” (Powers). Though she works hard at her job, traveling weekly from coast to coast to serve in her district and in Washington, Representative Sanchez’s attire often becomes the topic of discussion.
Women’s clothing in many ways is set up for scrutiny. A standard men’s suit is hard to deviate from and as a result, men face no scrutiny for showing their legs or for wearing a low cut top. Because of this fact, women’s clothing is inherently more distracting than menswear. The challenge for women then becomes to keep skirt lengths respectable and revealing clothing to a minimum. This is a challenge Loretta Sanchez has ignored and as a result, her wardrobe has evolved into a front-page *Los Angeles Times* story.

This section will look at distracting attire from a far different angle than the case of Barney Frank. First, a fashion profile on Loretta Sanchez from my personal perspective as a former intern in her office details the type of clothing she wears and how she wears it. Alison Lurie’s opinions on clothing and sexuality in the workplace also provide a better sense of the historical notion of female
attire including the significance of the color red, a prominent color in
Representative Sanchez’s wardrobe. As well, I describe further my personal
experience in her district office, highlighting example the distraction her clothes
often became.

Fashion Profile: Loretta Sanchez

For those who know their fashion collections, the prevalence of St. John
styled knits in Congress comes as no surprise. The standard two-piece piece is
a look often donned by Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez to the point that many
know her for wearing St. John. Within her busy schedule, Congresswoman
Sanchez finds time to schedule fittings at St. John headquarters in Irvine,
California. The suit pieces are often made in matching, brighter hues such as
coral, tangerine, or teal and are made of different fabrics from wool to linen
depending on the season. Loretta Sanchez is known to pick the brightest colors
in the St. John collection. She most often wears a two-piece skirt and matching
blazer, at times wearing a matching shift dress in place of a high-waisted pencil
skirt. The pieces are tailored to fit her curves and are often worn without a tank
or shell underneath, revealing a very long neckline.

Loretta Sanchez is rarely wears any type of shoe that is not a high-heeled
stilettos, a trademark that the Los Angeles Times deems her “come-hither heels”
(Powers). She also wears black patent leather boots in the winter with her St.
John knits. The first day of the 111th Congress, Sanchez wore a fiery red St.
John knit pencil skirt and blazer with black patent leather boots and nude or no
pantyhose. Her make-up remains somewhat consistent, alternating between lighter lip-glosses and deeper-hued lipsticks. Her hair color and style are less consistent, as she goes from light brown to blonde, curly to wavy to straight, long to short, in sexy updos and flirty waves. Sanchez’s jewelry is modest, though at times she has been photographed wearing large hoop earrings and flashy brooches.

The Run-on Sentence

The case of Loretta Sanchez is the perfect example of business attire gone awry. Author Alison Lurie believes that “clothes worn on the job… are supposed to downplay rather than flaunt sexuality… But anyone who dresses for work as if he or she were about to go out on the town is likely to arouse unfriendly gossip or worse,” (230). The form-fitting and revealing cuts of Sanchez’s St. Johns knits hardly convey the “degree of thoughtfulness and seriousness” Karen Finney believes the attire politicians where should convey.

Recalling Lurie’s notion of an outfit as a completed sentence, Sanchez’s outfit in many ways is a run-on sentence. Her attire speaks to the skirted suits that many women in Congress wear, but at the same time they send a message of overt sexuality. Because it sends so many mixed messages, Sanchez’s wardrobe causes much distraction as onlookers must decipher her run-on sentence of an outfit.
Furthermore, one of the most prevalent colors in Loretta Sanchez’s wardrobe is red. Alison Lurie explains, “Certain details of costume convey a direct sexual message. Bright red clothing, the exposure of more than the usual amount of flesh and the wearing of revealingly tight garments are universally recognized signs,” (230-261). While Sanchez may want to use her femininity to convey a message of power, she more often puts forth a message of appropriateness. Her overtly flirtatious wardrobe becomes the center of attention when the attention should be on what she says and does.

Lurie believes that “to wear the costume considered ‘proper’ for a situation acts as a sign of involvement in it, and the person whose clothes do not conform to these standards is likely to be more or less subtly excluded from participation,” (5). When Sanchez wears clothing that suggests an agenda other than that of a serious politician, she can at times appear uninvolved. The cut of her suits and height of her heels stand out from the bland aesthetic of Capitol Hill. As a result, Sanchez is “excluded from participation” in the sense that her newsworthy happenings involve her clothing and not her political capability.

While Sanchez, has been reelected in her district by comfortable margins over the last few election cycles, she has higher hopes. Having already begun a “People for Loretta 2010” fund, Sanchez plans a run for Governor of California. Her district, California’s 47th located central Orange County is an urban area inhabited by culturally diverse population. Her bordering district, California’s 48th is home to a more affluent and Caucasian population, not unlike the women seen
on popular reality television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. If the women seen on this show offer any insight on the local fashion of affluent and powerful women, it is a younger, skin revealing and wealth apparent aesthetic. Loretta perfectly fits the bill for the publicly perceived woman of Orange County. However, Dena Bunis points out in her *Orange County Register* article, “It’s unclear how well-known Sanchez is outside of Orange County.” While Orange County is up and coming in its popularity nation-wide, Sanchez’s district is only one out 53 in California. Furthermore, the aesthetic of Orange County women may be recognized state and nation-wide, but it is not necessarily praised.

As Washington D.C.-based fashion designer, Rochelle Behrens suggests, “[Loretta Sanchez] may need to tone it down a bit,” when she runs for Governor (Personal Interview). To better explain the properties of political images that do not translate, Behrens offers an example from her hometown of San Diego, California. Donna Frye, a local city councilwoman decided to run for Mayor of San Diego. After years of successful work locally, including a push for clean water legislation that has now been adopted state-wide, Frye entered the mayoral race with an impressive resume. While the race was gruelingly long and resulted in several recounts and run-offs, Behrens believes Donna Frye’s image may have had something to do with it. The wife of a well-known surfer, Frye fits the southern San Diego look (“About Donna Frye”). Behrens describes her as “an older, washed up surfer. She has long fried blonde hair, she is wrinkled, she
has spent way too much time in the sun, bleached blonde. She is a hard-looking woman, but she is very successful because she appeals to her demographic” (Personal Interview). After a long and difficult campaign, Frye did not win the mayoral election after much dispute. Behrens believes, “She may have not appealed to the people in North County [looking] like that. She fits the look for locals, but it may not translate elsewhere.” Though a much beloved and successful politician in her local area, Frye was likely not a viable candidate as a result of a physical image not recognized as serious outside of southern San Diego. In the same way, Loretta Sanchez’s local and flirtatious aesthetic may not translate into the viability she needs to win the Democratic nomination in California come 2010.

**Personal Experience**

I remember my first day interning in Representative Loretta Sanchez’s district office. At the time, Sanchez was in her tenth year representing central Orange County, California, and it was the first year I became involved in politics. The office was exactly as I had imagined a district office to be—decorated with flags and photographs of the Congresswoman and other elected officials. It was not until I took a second look at the official photos of Congress that I discovered something curious. Session after Congressional session, she consistently donned garments that stood out because of their sexy silhouettes and bright-hues. I could spot Loretta Sanchez out of her 435 colleagues within seconds.
The first day I met Congresswoman Sanchez, she was dressed in a figure-fitting, cobalt blue pencil skirted-suit and stiletto heels, rambling off the day’s to-do list to a nearby staffer. Not only did the shock of her brightly colored outfits finally resonate, but the revealing cut of her suit left me in complete surprise. While it was refreshing to know that not all politicians maintained a stereotypical appearance, I was curious as to how she felt socially permitted to wear such clothing as an elected public official. The longer I interned for her office, the more I learned about her sharp wit and the social causes she devoted her service to. However, I was constantly distracted by the vibrancy of her wardrobe and how she seemed to flaunt her sexuality through the deep cut necklines and tight-fitting skirts.

I later came to find that members of the media and many of her fellow colleagues felt the same way. While searching for clips of the Congresswoman in the Los Angeles Times and the Orange County Register, I came across an article on the front page of the Los Angeles Times entitled, “For Rep. Sanchez, a hot-tomato label means a hot potato” (Powers). The article introduces Sanchez as a “paradox” and a “siren… known for her strenuous workout regimen and fondness for come-hither heels… few members of Congress, if any, are such a walking Rorschach test” (Powers). Though the article later mentions some of Sanchez’s legislative accomplishments, the majority of its content is dedicated to her reputation as a woman with a coquettish personality and a wardrobe to match.
The stories that go on the front pages of periodicals like the *Los Angeles Times* are those that will sell newspapers. In the case of Loretta Sanchez, her front-page story is what the press has deemed inappropriate attire, a distracting element that keeps discussion of her legislative achievements to a minimum. In the article, Sanchez confesses that traditionally what the public has seen as far as a woman in politics is someone that dresses a certain way and has a certain demeanor and is always very serious, because that’s what it took to break through... I think you are seeing a whole new set of women (Powers).

While it may be true that the ways in which women in Congress are perceived are changing, the truth remains that constituents and colleagues alike expect a certain degree of seriousness in both dress and behavior from politicians. Political communications expert, Karen Finney believes that the most important message a politician’s clothing should convey is a “degree of thoughtfulness and seriousness.” (Personal interview). Sanchez believes women were once “very serious... because that’s what it took to break through,” (qtd. in Powers). However, conveying seriousness is a quality constituents look for in leaders both men and women, both then and now.
What the Experts Say about Distracting Attire

When Barney Frank dresses in shirts that reveal his “aspirational rather than actual” size, he reveals a side of insecurity (Toobin). In addition, Loretta Sanchez’s clothing often sends cues to her colleagues and constituents that she is, as voted in Washingtonian Magazine, “No Altar Girl,” (“Best and Worst of Congress”). Anita Dunn agrees that as a politician, it is important to make sure that your clothes are not important. In politics, attire should reveal little beyond one’s status as an elected official, his or her understanding of age and gender appropriateness, and his or her connection to contemporary cultural cues (i.e., not wearing a trend that is “out of fashion”). Dunn believes that the biggest fashion faux pas politicians make is “when [they] wear something that is so eye-catching, whether good or bad, that it becomes the total subject of conversation.” She adds that “the idea behind jewelry and clothing is that they shouldn’t distract from what the person is saying and what they are trying to communicate,” (Personal interview). The problem with both Barney Frank and Loretta Sanchez is that their polar opposite ways of dressing at times speak louder than the actual messages they are trying to convey. Dunn believes that physical appearance can be used to send cues” and that politicians must therefore “be sensitive to how [they] dress” (Personal Interview).

Fashion expert, Tim Gunn, believes politicians, from the unkempt to the immoderate, can send the wrong message. “One of my visual tests [as a constituent] would be, if we are trusting this person, how capable is this person of
putting together him or herself?” (Personal Interview). At the surface level, Gunn believes Barney Frank’s appearance “speaks to the sloppification of America” (Personal Interview). Gunn encourages men like Frank to do away with the oxford button-down collar shirt that “speaks to one’s college days” and the skinny, juvenile print ties that make him appear larger and not as serious as he truly is. He offers this advice:

Men in general, we have it so easy compared to women. It is the simplest thing in the world… The key to getting it right is the same for men as it is for women... It’s about three very specific elements that need to work together. It’s silhouette, it’s proportion and it’s fit. Most men, their suits and their clothes in general are simply too big and they would really benefit from buying a suit that is one size smaller and then having it tailored, (Personal Interview).

Upon analyzing images of Loretta Sanchez, Gunn believes that many of her fashion choices are not suitable for a maturing congresswoman. In regards to the footwear the *Los Angeles Times* refer to as “come-hither heels.” Gunn confirms that “we know the stiletto can go any number of directions. One is inappropriate sexiness. It looks as though [Loretta Sanchez] makes almost everything inappropriate,” (Personal Interview). It is important that women maintain femininity with their style but silhouette, proportion, and fit are just as important for woman as they are for men. The key is to divert attention to one’s actions, not one’s clothing.
Conclusion

As Peter Kovar suggests, “People aren’t necessarily looking for people who are better than them to vote for,” (Personal interview). Barney Frank’s appearance may help some constituents better relate to his image. Yet, for many others, his untidiness creates a distraction leaving voters with the opportunity to question the reasoning behind such unkemptness. On the other hand, politicians like Loretta Sanchez need not attempt to stand out from the rest. As seen in the previous chapter on projecting the correct image, constituents are looking for a politician to whom they can relate. One way to better relate to one’s constituents is to make sure clothing is not the loudest communicator in the room.
CONCLUSION
CHAPTER EIGHT | CONCLUSION

The lives of public officials are just that—public. What they say and do is just as important as how they look and what they wear. For this reason, fashion and style are as significant for politicians as any other public persona. This thesis has ventured into the areas of fashion and style within politics from the perspectives of the top officials on fashion and political communication and has looked at some of the most pertinent examples of leaders across the style spectrum. To conclude this manual of political style, I reflect on the advice that has been offered by the experts I interviewed, the key findings and the limitations of my study, and the hopeful outlook I have for our future leaders.

The “Dos and Don’ts”

The advice of those interviewed benefit both men and women working in the political field. As part of this conclusion, I have created a “Top Dos and Don’ts” list comprised of the expert opinions I gathered in my study:

**DO** dress everyday like you are going to be on camera.

As Tim Gunn suggests, “When you are in this position [as a political leader] I would think that my whole mode of operating would be, ‘I could be on-camera at any moment, which is why I should always want to look my absolute best’” (Personal Interview). Remember that as a public official, your life is public. What you wear on your days off may require as much thought as what you wear the day you are sworn in.
_DON’T make major style changes without an explanation._

Karen Finney believes that “the biggest faux pas is when [politicians] wear something that is a little bit different. Anytime you are doing something different, it’s going to catch attention... There has to be an explanation” (Personal Interview). Wearing something that seems out of place for the occasion or out of the ordinary may receive negative attention. For instance, changing one’s hair, such as the example of Hillary Clinton cutting her hair short, can cause a stir and may become the lead story. To make sure the focus is on your political agenda, keep drastic changes to a minimum and always have a viable explanation handy.

_Do enlist the help of a good tailor._

All politicians can benefit from a good tailor. One of Tim Gunn’s mottos when it comes to appearing presentable is “Silhouette, proportion, and fit” (Personal Interview). Gunn also believes that men “have it so easy compared to women” when it comes to dress (Personal Interview). Having a good tailor can keep suits intact and nicely fitted, while helping to avoid any Barney Frank-like situations.

_DON’T wear attire that can be distracting._

Anita Dunn believes that “the biggest [mistake] is when you wear something that is so eye-catching, whether good or bad, that it becomes the total subject of conversation” (Personal Interview). This includes looking too suggestive or appearing unkempt. Refrain from attire that speaks louder than you.
DO wear clothing that fits well, that you feel comfortable in, and that is authentic to you.

The most important thing about your attire is to make it unimportant. You should always feel comfortable in what you wear and not look like you are masquerading as someone you are not. As Peter Kovar reveals, “People aren't necessarily looking for people who are better than them to vote for” (Personal Interview). It’s important to fit in and it’s important to feel comfortable. Rochelle Behrens sums it by stating that “the question is balancing pragmatism and looking good. If you can do that, then you have true style. If you can be comfortable while looking [stylish], then you care enough to make the effort” (Personal Interview). The right balance of comfort, authenticity, and professionalism results in the most fashionable of leaders.

Review of Key Findings

Women are by far the most affected by physical appearance in their political careers. As exemplified by Hillary Clinton, women must adapt to their social and political roles by the way they dress. Men on the other hand, change little about their appearance when shifting from a statewide to a national spotlight. Clinton’s example also demonstrates how women are not socially permitted to adapt their appearance in the context of casual environments. Because women have yet to be legitimized as viable political leaders, they must
remain in their business attire when campaigning or in office so as not to complicate their image.

Sarah Palin highlights the importance of maintaining an image to which constituents can relate. While many politicians like Governor Palin adopt a celebrity-like status, it is important that female candidates nail the “right image” immediately in order to keep others, such as celebrity-like media, from defining that image first. Additionally, Barney Frank and Loretta Sanchez provide helpful examples on the topic of distracting appearances and the necessity of maintaining and image that translates more broadly when running for higher office. It is key that politicians’ clothing not be the loudest communicator in the room. This is even more crucial for politicians who want their image to translate to a much larger constituency.

**Limitations**

One of the most disappointing and surprising elements of my data collection was the lack of participation from political leaders. Turn down after turn down, I started to notice a pattern. It was not that these leaders did not believe the topic of my thesis is significant. As recognized by the “Are you kidding?” look given by one Member of Congress in reaction to participation in my thesis, leaders understand that the topic of fashion in politics is ridden with taboo. According to our social perceptions, leaders are not supposed to worry about what they wear, and fashion and clothing are deemed superficial topics for discussion. Yet we remain to be fascinated by Hillary Clinton’s pantsuits and
Barney Frank’s unkempt appearance. Furthermore, Sarah Palin reveals that campaigns do in fact understand that clothing and upkeep is very important.

Final Thoughts

As campaign season after campaign season go by, the relationship between clothing and candidate image becomes more and more significant. Yet, while journalistic coverage of fashion in politics expands, little academic focus is paid to its social implications. My hope is that this thesis has shed light on the issues concerning fashion and style in the political realm while offering solutions and suggestions to create and maintain a viable image as a public leader. Keeping in mind the social implications of dress and the advice offered by some of the most knowledgeable individuals in the fields of fashion and politics, may you now brave the political stage, one outfit at a time.
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*Special thanks to Annette Lee for editing all of the title page images.*
METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Karen Finney, DNC Communications Director (at time of interview)
Currently a Private Consultant
In-Person Interview Questions
Friday, February 13th, 2009 - 3pm

Do I have your permission to record this interview for the sole purpose of this thesis project?

1. Do you feel that style/fashion/physical appearance is important for political leaders?
2. Are there any specific examples you can give of instances during campaigns (possibly that you worked on) when fashion/style/clothing was an issue?
3. Have you ever noticed discrepancies between the way candidates dress on the campaign trail versus how they dress when in office?
4. Have you ever worked in an office where internal polling was conducted regarding the candidate’s appearance?
5. Do you feel there are discrepancies between how female and male politicians are expected to dress?
6. In your opinion, what is the biggest appearance/fashion faux pas politicians make? (Male and Female)
7. Are there any politicians, at any level male or female, whose style stands out to you (good or bad)?
8. What recommendations do you have for current or aspiring politicians regarding fashion/style?
10. What do you feel heels say (if anything at all) about female politicians?
11. Viewed and discussed photographs of politicians.

Regarding On-Camera Experience:

1. Do you have any general style tips/rules/suggestions for on-camera and/or public appearances?
2. Approximately how much time do you spend getting ready for on-camera interviews?
3. Is there a particular color you wear (or do you recommend) on-camera more than others? Why?
4. Is there a particular brand/designer you (bosses) wear on-camera more than others? Why?
5. Given that men dominate the political landscape, do you find yourself taking this into account when addressing your/others’ style? How so?

Peter Kovar, Chief of Staff to Rep. Barney Frank
Phone Interview Questions
Thursday, February 19th, 2009 - 5pm

Do I have your permission to record this interview for the sole purpose of this thesis project?
1. As a chief of staff and as someone who has worked on campaigns, do you think that physical appearance is important for politicians?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about the "Neatness isn't everything" campaign?
3. Does Chairman Frank still continue to get media attention for his appearance or anything like that?
4. Has there ever been any sort of internal polling that you could talk about from his office or any office that you may have worked in on anything relating to appearance?
5. Do you think that that there might be a corollary between how tough a race is and the attention paid to physical appearance?

Anita Dunn, Former Top Advisor on the 2008 Obama Campaign
Media Consultant, Squier, Knapp, Dunn (SKD)
In-Person Interview Questions
Thursday, March 4th, 2009 - 9:30 am

Do I have your permission to record this interview for the sole purpose of this thesis project?
1. Do you feel that style/fashion/physical appearance is important for political leaders?
2. Are there any specific examples you can give of instances during campaigns (possibly that you worked on) when fashion/style/clothing was an issue?
3. Have you ever worked in an office where/done internal polling was conducted regarding the candidate's appearance?
4. Can you discuss the importance of media training? Do you ever monitor what people are wearing? Suggest that they wear something different?
5. What about the color red? Why is it popular?
6. Do you have any examples of campaigns where they maybe used something about physical appearance as an asset to their campaign that would not normally be so?
7. Is there a particular color/combination you suggest wearing on-camera? Why?
8. Do you have any general style tips/rules/suggestions for on-camera and/or public appearances?
10. In your opinion, what is the biggest fashion faux pas politicians make? (Male and Female)

ometown Gunn, Fashion Expert
Liz Claiborne Chief Creative Officer, Bravo’s Project Runway, Bravo’s Tim Gunn’s Guide to Style
In-Person Interview Questions
Sunday, February 15th, 2009- 2:30pm

Do I have your permission to record this interview for the sole purpose of this thesis?

1. Have you ever consulted politicians? During campaigns?
2. Can you talk a bit about the consistency in style for candidates? Is it important?
3. Why is red a popular color? What are good on-camera colors?
4. Can you expand on “Men have it easy” in regards to fashion? Discuss structure, rules?
5. Do you find that there are fashion/style discrepancies between parties?
6. In your opinion, what is the biggest appearance/fashion faux pas politicians make? (Male and Female)
7. Do you have any general style tips/rules/suggestions for on-camera and/or public appearances?
8. Are there any politicians, at any level male or female, whose style stands out to you (good or bad)?
10. What recommendations do you have for current or aspiring politicians regarding fashion/style?
11. Do you feel there are discrepancies between how female and male politicians are expected to dress?
12. What do you feel heels say (if anything at all) about female politicians?
13. Viewed and discussed photographs of politicians.

Rochelle Behrens, Creator and Owner of Rochelle Behrens Collection
Former DC Lobbyist
In-Person Interview Questions
Wednesday, March 4th, 2009- 11am

Do I have your permission to record this interview for the sole purpose of this thesis?
1. Do you feel that style/fashion/physical appearance is important for political leaders?
2. Given that men dominate the political landscape, do you feel women should take this fact into account when addressing their personal appearance?
3. Do you feel there are discrepancies between how female and male politicians are expected to dress?
4. Are there discrepancies between the ways parties dress (ie. Democrats vs Republicans)?
5. Are there any politicians, at any level male or female, whose style stands out to you (good or bad)?
6. What do you feel heels say (if anything at all) about female politicians?
7. Do you feel that there is a difference between personal style and physical appearance, or do they go hand-in-hand?
8. Can you talk a bit about the differences between men's and women's clothing? Structure, design, rules, significance?
9. Do you think it matters whether a woman wears pants or a skirt with her suit?
10. How important do you think it is to maintain femininity?
11. Say a woman wears a suit, not in a particularly fitted way with flat loafers and in plain colors. What do you think that says about her?
12. For male politicians, the casual look is pretty tied down: polo and khakis. What do the women get to wear?
13. Viewed and discussed photographs of politicians.