

Sartorial Scrutiny of First Lady Fashion:

Evaluation of Media Coverage Inequities Involving Female Figures in Politics



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AN INTRODUCTION TO SARTORIAL SCRUTINY IN POLITICS



Discussion during a political cycle covers many topics of widespread interest: the economy, foreign policy, taxation plans, a candidate's personal finance history, visible behavior characteristics, oratory prowess, and leadership qualities. Media work to interpret these topics and provide meaning and substance to their own rhetoric. However, while discussion of politics within political contexts is consistent among most media, the preceding list leaves out one particular topic of discussion to which female political personalities are uniquely subjected: their personal style.

To some extent, the way a leader dresses, particularly in politics, is important to the voting public. Common perceptions are that if the leader cannot thoughtfully put together a clothing selection which is clean, unwrinkled, and somewhat coordinated, their ability to thoughtfully lead and logically guide a nation may also be suspect. Further, haphazard or inappropriate clothing suggests a lack of attention to detail, and/or a lack of respect for the audience.

Women in politics are subject to sartorial scrutiny and understand this evaluation of their wardrobe will take place before they have uttered a word. Women in politics understand their appearance will be judged immediately by those viewing their clothing in person, and in perpetuity by those reading and watching media coverage, which often includes specific information about or visual images of their clothing selections.

Of all the women in politics, those most evaluated for their fashion statements are typically the first ladies.

Arguably the preeminent fashion icon of first ladies, Jacqueline Kennedy has been gone for nearly 20 years, but her style legacy lives on. Before, during, and after her husband's tragic presidency, Kennedy was at the fashion forefront with her jet-setting lifestyle and perennial pillbox hat.¹ Contrasted with Kennedy's trendy fashion sense is former first lady and current Secretary of State Hillary Clinton circa 1996; hair scrunchies and mom sweaters defined her casual wardrobe during the majority of her husband's term in office. The obviously-80s fashion statements continue to haunt Clinton in current years, including instances such as popular women's magazine *Elle* reporting Clinton's staffers still trying to make the Secretary's ubiquitous scrunchie disappear.²



Beyond the obvious sartorial scrutiny of these two former first ladies in specific, and other women in the political arena in general, lies a bigger issue, namely the disparate nature of media coverage of female political figures versus male political figures. While actresses, musicians, and popular culture figures are accustomed to the "Who are you wearing?" question, women in politics often find their politics second to a far more subtle scrutiny placed on their wardrobes, specifically in reference to the style, designer, accessibility, and cost of the clothing. For many female political figures, and Clinton in particular, their politics becomes secondary to their fashion sense, from main stream media and the blogosphere alike. While this commentary should be expected from fashion television, the fact main stream media such as National Public Radio and *Newsweek* reduce female political figures to the designer labels on their clothing suggests a gender-biased inequity applicable to women in the West Wing.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Clinton_New_Hampshire_Victory.jpg

This study looks at standards of men's and women's dress in Western countries, and compares media coverage of female political figures in an attempt to reveal disparity in political media discourse. For the purposes of evaluation, media coverage inequities during two political cycles will be reviewed: the 2008 presidential campaign and the 2012 presidential campaign. The media coverage of current first lady Michelle Obama, former first lady Hillary Clinton, Ann Romney, and Governor Sarah Palin will be evaluated for occurrences of fashion commentary as part of legitimate political discourse by mainstream news media outlets.

ENCLOTHED COGNITION

Unwanted attention or secret weapon? No matter how the use of fashion is interpreted, women in politics keenly understand their clothing selections will be scrutinized far beyond that to which their male counterparts are subjected. Although judgments are made of both sexes based on what they wear, only women are objectified and sexualized through their clothing selections, particularly by other women. This judgment starts from the moment the woman is seen in her clothing, and continues as the designer is identified and the cost for the ensemble is revealed. For women in politics, the evaluation of their clothing choices affects interpretation of their professional and financial competence, just as their clothing selections are evaluated for visual message and meaning.³ Additional prejudice is levied against women who are successful in traditionally-masculine career paths, such as politics, to which their clothing selections compound innate prejudices by other women.⁴ The violation of gender-specific roles, regardless of clothing selection, leads to decreased confidence by others in the woman's professional competence, and ultimately decreased professional success as a result of clothing-related bias.



Johnson and Gurung's research is epitomized in the clothing selections of former first lady and current United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.⁵ A media target for her clothing selections since the late 1980s, Clinton's fashion evolution from mom wear in the 1990s to dapper dresser in current years has taken place in front of the watchful eye of the White House press corps.



In 2010, Clinton was in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan at a "towninterview" session moderated by a team comprised of a local television personality and a media correspondent. In a transcript of the session, Clinton prophetically answers a gender equity question by explaining women are evaluated critically, not for their prowess or professional success, but rather for their clothing selections, as unrelated as they may be to professional achievement.⁶ No more than 30 seconds later, the moderator asks Clinton which designers she prefers, to which Clinton replies "Would you ever ask a man that question?".⁷ Laughing, the moderator replies "Probably not. Probably not." but then repeats the question, awaiting a response from Clinton.

By Background: User:Lokal_Profil Romney: United States Congress Obama: SEIU Walk a Day in My Shoes 2008, edit by Matthias.kötter McCain: Eric Draper / White House. Clinton: Marc Nozell Huckabee: United States Department of Health and Human Services Combined by Kjetil_r [CC-BY-SA-2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Clinton's comments illustrate how she astutely understands the challenges facing women in positions of power. Women in positions of power are not evaluated exclusively for their ability and successes; rather, a woman's clothing starts the conversation and evaluation long before she has said a word. Women's clothing, and first lady clothing in particular, says something more about the wearer than merely that they prefer a certain color. Political messages are easily deduced from what the first ladies wear. Often, the first lady's clothing contains the conveyance of a message; a message that the first lady understands they should wear their party's color or need to make a social statement, related to their activities, through their clothing.

Adam and Galinsky call the concept of sartorial influence on psychological processes "enclothed cognition."⁸ Enclothed cognition relies on fashion to connote symbolism for both the wearer and the receiver of the message, with clothing of varying nature inculcating perspective and meaning. Contrasted with the late 20th-century trend of power dressing fashion for women, enclothed cognition reveals women must *perform* mediated masculine clothing choices while still doing femininity in order to be successful. However, the line between female power dressing and lesbian dress code submission can become blurred and confusing for those receiving the messages, thereby confounding the intended meaning and causing undue distractions.⁹

Societal need to convey societal-determined appropriate clothing messages is ostensibly communicated through the plethora of makeover programs on television. Take for example fashion television makeover program *What Not to Wear*. The premise of *What Not to Wear* is to take a woman—the dowdier, fashionably-challenged, misguided, the better—and transform her from ugly ducking into a relevantly-fashionable swan. The show, which is arguably part of a more broad television trend of makeover shows aimed at individuals, businesses, homes, and the like, has a formulaic approach to remaking its fashion victims by "policing the border of fashionable dressing."¹⁰ Television programs such as *What Not to Wear* further promulgate the perspective that women are defined by their fashion selections. Relatedly, fashion is promoted via media, and fashion responds to media by working to maintain relevance to the buying population.¹¹ By perpetuating current societal standards and expectations of fashionable clothing selections, the media is creating an unending cycle of fashion imagery on which women must rely.



The issue remains women are susceptible to multiple images of womanhood which are incompatible with one another. How then, can women achieve status in a male-dominated profession such as politics? According to Hahn, women find difficulty balancing the multiple images of womanhood and typically allow one or more of the stereotypical images to slip.¹² It is this conflagration of maternal mother, seductive siren, innocent ingenue, and professional powerhouse which leaves women at a distinct disadvantage.¹³

Women in politics, and arguably in business settings in general, are susceptible to sartorial scrutiny. The focus places the female at a distinct disadvantage. Women who dress too masculine are accused of being lesbians or dykes, despite the fact the "serious work environment" expectations were developed by men, for men and women must abide the expectations to have a modicum of success in professional arenas.¹⁴ For a woman to compete in a gender-specific role, she must adopt some of the habits and behaviors of the role, but strike careful balance to maintain societal expectations of womanhood. Compounding the issue is that women who dress too provocatively are judged harshly by other women and suffer from objectification and challenges to their competence. Women subject to this scrutiny can only develop professional respect from other women through



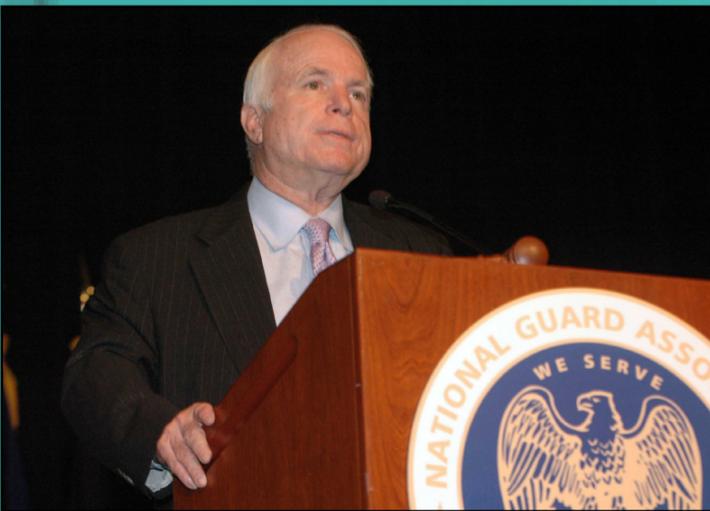
hard work and diligence.¹⁵ Further, when dressed too provocatively, women are deemed as less intelligent, less determined, and less competent, regardless of the professional position they may hold and how successful their leadership may be.¹⁶

Finding balance between dowdy matron and sexual object, explicitly for women of power, proves challenging, particularly when ongoing fashion evolution is necessary to weave in and through political and social circles while maintaining relevance.¹⁷ While expected from bloggers and fashion commentators, the idea that fashion would combine with politics in mainstream media coverage confounds. Women in power are finding their fashion selections as part of regular discourse in legitimate media outlets, and adding yet another distraction to the clarity of messages the female political figure carries.

A survey of fashion perception of women in positions of power revealed nearly 57 percent of women dress more conservatively to boost their career potential.¹⁸ Additionally, more than half of those surveyed had adjusted their vocal tone for a more masculine, throaty voice. Hahn recognizes women in politics who fail to adapt a masculine manner of dress may fail to be elected because of the appearance they are not capable of “professional behavior.”¹⁹

Former United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright questioned the focus on fashion for women in politics in a 2011 interview for *Vogue*. Albright said “It’s outrageous. Nobody comments on what men wear.”²⁰ Albright is correct; commentary on men’s fashion is limited by the limited fashion options. As a result of the variety of options in women’s clothing variety of commentary is possible.²¹

Conversely, men in politics are evaluated for their presidential looks, but via differing media language and illustrative narration.²² Take for example Republican presidential candidate John McCain in 2008. When did our nation last elect an old, graying, white, man president? Likely it was before the television era subjected public figures to 24/7 photography, television, and sartorial scrutiny. In today’s media climate, the physical visage of political figures must stand up to the typically-relentless scrutiny of a 24-hour media cycle. The challenge is compounded by the *blogosphere*, which makes any person with a computer or smart phone a fashion critic and political commentator. The plethora of blogs and bloggers makes locating legitimate news sources, free of fashion commentary, challenging on average internet searches, leaving news seekers with few options for frank, honest political discussion.



By Staff Sgt. Jim Greenhill [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Male political figures have the luxury of donning a virtual uniform: tailored suit, pressed shirt, polished shoes, and respectable tie. Slight variations based on nature of appearance may result in the suit jacket laid neatly over a chair and the shirt-sleeves rolled up to signify hard work and reliability, or a pair of rugged, loosely-fit jeans to convey accessibility in more casual settings. Both candidates in the 2012 presidential election were complimented in the news media for their fashion sense, but the rhetoric did not reduce the quality of the candidates’ messages to the cost of their suits, as happens with female political figures.

Female political figures must proceed more cautiously, lest the size of their *cankles* or androgynous fashion sense be broadcast on cable television.²³ Further, female political figures must balance their attempt to level the fashion playing field and put the issues, rather than fashion, in front of the American public. Hahn suggests women struggle to find balance between femininity and power.²⁴ The challenge becomes a conflict between fashion statement and political messaging.



wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Houghton_house_Netanyahu_Albright_Arafat.jpg

THE POLITICS OF FASHION

No female political figure is immune to the sartorial scrutiny: First Lady Michelle Obama's off-the-rack Tracy Reese dress at the 2012 Democratic National Convention was criticized for the lack of power color and appropriateness, Ann Romney's 2012 Republican National Convention Oscar de la Renta ensemble was panned for its sheer cost, and Hillary Clinton's wardrobe while meeting with leaders in southeast Asia earned sideways glances for its obvious presidential flair.²⁵



What fashion fate did candidates in the 2012 United States presidential election experience? Few stories discussed male fashion as part of political discourse beyond criticizing Paul Ryan's suit tailoring and the prevalent *dad wear* of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and Democratic incumbent Barack Obama on the campaign trail.²⁶ On the whole, those stories which did appear and included male fashion notes were from fashion-related sources, rather than hard news sources which included fashion as part of news accounts, which is the underlying trend for female political figures.

Fashion and politics, primarily for women in politics, are more intricately intertwined than ever. Variation of dress is apparent in everyday wardrobe selections for women in politics, making the option of media coverage of political fashion that much simpler for news media.

SECRETARY OF STATE HILLARY CLINTON

Clinton's evolution from matronly and dowdy first lady to modern style maven has increased the attention of style media, particularly as rumor of her possible presidential candidacy in 2016 gains traction.²⁷ Undoubtedly, the prevalence of style messaging in popular culture, combined with unyielding media scrutiny, contributes to Clinton's evolving fashion sense.²⁸ Should the Secretary of State appear in her outdated fashion from husband Bill Clinton's presidential years, her common sense and sanity would be called into question. Clinton's own style evolution directly correlates to Hahn's mutable style points as she continues to progress her fashion from fluffy sweaters and tied-back hair common of women in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to a more chic and tailored wardrobe accompanied by a feminine, yet classy, chignon in recent years.²⁹

Hahn explains that women are expected to evolve style with current trends and are chided for obviously once-fashionable statements which have gone out of style.³⁰ During a 2012 visit to Brunei to calm tensions in the South China Sea, media coverage of Clinton's political effort to mediate maritime disputes was marred by secondary coverage of her wardrobe while on the visit. Clinton sported a fashionable, yet masculine wardrobe, made apparent by dark pants and a large overcoat. The combination serves to effectively eliminate feminine features and make her appear more capable of leading the country.³¹

In Clinton's case, her choice of black slacks and structured cream overcoat eliminate any indication of a feminine figure and balance out her hips and bust. The overcoat, while considered stylish, is paired with a turtleneck, leaving only Clinton's hands and head appropriately exposed for a visit to conservative Brunei. The resulting fashion is culturally appropriate, conservative, and powerful.

Clinton's own visage is that of sobriety and seriousness, looking sufficiently hard so as to maintain levity in all situations.



State Department photo by William Ng / Dec 01, 2011

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA

From what she's wearing, to how she styles her hair, to the color on her fingers and toes, each first lady is expected to be the picture of put-together. On *NPR*, political consultant and former congresswoman Marjorie Margolies explained "we've always looked at what first ladies-to-be, or first ladies, wear."³² As the current target of mainstream media, First Lady Michelle Obama is as praised and criticized for her fashion as is her husband, United States President Barack Obama, for his politics. The *Hostess-in-Chief* is oft-expected to be the picture-perfect image of American royalty, and Obama's typical response to the responsibility is elegant aplomb.

During the 2008 election, Obama sought out young, up-and-coming designers, many of whom were unfamiliar to the American public. Obama famously selected 21-year-old Jason Wu to design her Inaugural Ball dress, a designer whose garments are readily available at mainstream retailer Target. The message was clear; the White House will support American small business, and the first lady will not be extravagant or frivolous in her wardrobe selections. The message was compounded by Obama's wearing of costume jewelry to many events. Obama's message was that she did not need real jewels or expensive fashion to make a statement; she would successfully approach the American public dressed how she wanted, rather than as a prescribed representation of what the first lady is expected to be.

Obama's news coverage is as varied as her wardrobe itself; from news accounts calling her fashion accessible, economical, hoochie, sparkling, and outlandishly expensive, a picture of the first lady's fashion emerges.³³ When Obama re-wore a dress from just a month earlier for the final presidential debate of 2012, the media applauded her fiscally-conservative message of fashion recycling and elegant, but attainable, selection of designer.³⁴

Just a quick Google search for "Michelle Obama" nets a first page of ten entries, five of which are in some way about Obama's fashion. The third entry on the page, following the official White House website and search engine-savvy Wikipedia is "Mrs. O"—a website dedicated solely to Obama's fashion. Fourth is a story about a copy of Obama's 2012 election night dress, and fifth is a link to *Huffington Post*, where the first two stories on the page are about the Obama's fashion.³⁵ For some, first lady fashion fatigue has set in as the conversation has evolved from situational-appropriate wardrobe discussion or talk of economic support of the fashion industry, to the more simple "What is she wearing?"³⁶

Media coverage of Obama's daily life during the 2012 election would give the perception the first lady is about fashion and family first, politics second. Granted, as the first lady, Obama is not the political lightning rod her husband is, but her influence on American politics is undeniable.

At the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Obama delivered a personal, passionate speech about the man she loves and married, who fathered her children, and who wants to continue leading the country as Commander in Chief. After this shining example of Obama's oratory leadership, the focus was not on Obama's message, or her words, or her podium prowess; the focus was on her nail polish. The following morning, the *Today* show had reporter Savannah Guthrie reporting live from North Carolina, the site of the 2012 Democratic National Convention. Guthrie avoided talk of women's rights, or the *Mom-in-Chief* in the West Wing; rather, she earnestly told host Matt Lauer she couldn't confirm the name of the color of Obama's nail polish but would strive to do so.³⁷



<http://spoiledpretty.com/2012/09/did-michelle-obama-wear-opi-nail-polish-at-the-2012-dnc/>

Just one week after her husband won reelection, Newsweek outlined Obama's first three priorities.³⁸ All three priorities were apolitical on the surface, with undercurrents illustrating the Obama's potential influence on America. Of all the things which could be perceived as priority for the first lady over the next four years, *Newsweek* selected "Dress for success" as number three.³⁹ Veiled as political strategy via bolstering the apparel industry, the message is nonetheless clear; Obama must dress as is expected of the first lady, while eloquently communicating messages of support for small business America, American-led fashion efforts, and economic recovery strategy.



By Joyce N. Boghosian (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/slideshows/photo-cat30/>) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Highlighting the importance of media scrutiny of first lady fashion while making a bold comparison between first lady fashion icon Jacqueline Kennedy and current First Lady Michelle Obama is the purpose of *mrs-o.com*, a website which has been following Obama's fashion since September 2008. The website chronicles the daily wardrobe of Obama, with commentary on wearability and situational appropriateness supplemented with designer and price information. For those who would seek to copy Obama's fashion example. For many designers, a first lady wearing your fashion means selling out whatever frock she was sporting, and instant name recognition associated with the White House.⁴⁰ As explained by Mrs. O, Obama's influence, particularly in media coverage, is that of modern-day Jackie O, with accessibility, affordability, and attainability mixed in.

GOVERNOR SARAH PALIN



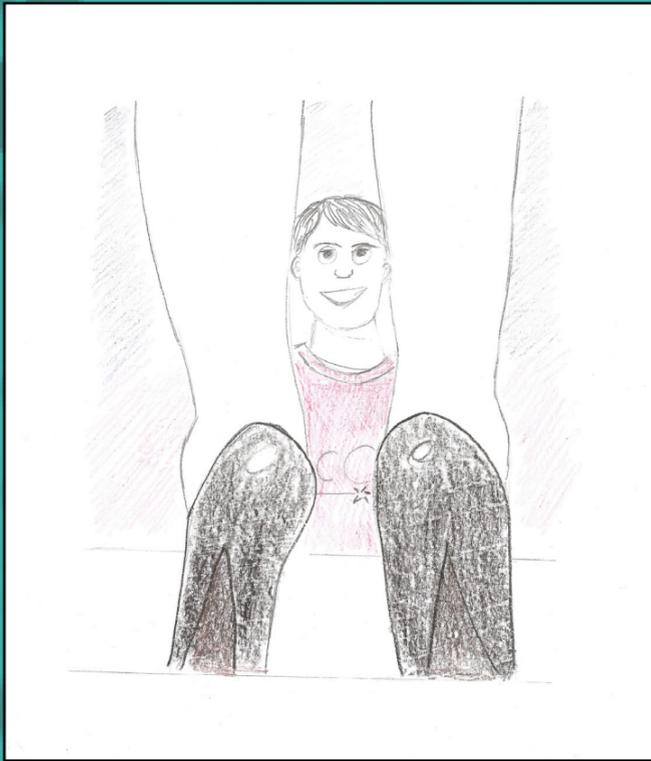
By Therealbs2002 (Own work) [CC-BY-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

No single figure of the 2008 presidential election was more polarizing than Alaska Governor and Republican Vice President candidate Sarah Palin. As the self-labeled "hockey mom," Palin's approach to the White House was as a gun-toting, hockey-watching, frontierswoman who is unafraid to roll up her sleeves and work. However, it was her outdated glasses, serious hairstyle, and sexy secretary clothing which really garnered the vice presidential candidate the most attention.

When it came down to media coverage of Palin's failed bid for the Vice President office, even legitimate news sources focused on fashion first, politics second. In a campaign trail article for the *New York Times*, Katharine Q. Seelye covered the Republican stop in Lancaster, Pennsylvania by highlighting the politics of presidential candidate John McCain, and Palin's red jacket and black dress.⁴¹ Despite not being required to be a fashion icon as the first lady is, Palin was still subjected to the similar scrutiny as Clinton and Obama.

Like Obama, Palin's fashion statements were mimicked by the American public. The reality of women watching what other women do was no more apparent than the rush of women to beauty salons to have their hair styled in a casual, yet elegant, "updo" like Palin wore throughout the 2008 campaign.⁴²

Coverage of women in politics can veil the talk of fashion behind visual establishment of a scene. In the *Charlotte Observer*, writer Lisa Zagaroli painted the picture of a campaign stop in Asheville, North Carolina by describing the physical environment, complete with explanation of Palin dressed down in jeans and jacket, before ever discussing why the candidates were in North Carolina to begin with⁴³, Fox News, while itself teetering on the edge of commentary versus news reporting in most situations, published a photo essay of Palin at a rally in



drawing by: Leandra C. Rayford

Pennsylvania in October, 2008, with images shot by legitimate photojournalism organization Reuters. The essay accompanied a story with Palin accusing Reuters and AP of “liberal media bias” and included one shot in particular of the backs of Palin’s legs with a young man in the audience looking up between them in a suggestive manner.⁴⁴

Arguably, Palin brought the conversation of fashion upon herself with the Republican Party’s \$150,000 shopping spree at high-end department stores in order to dress up the candidate for the campaign trail.⁴⁵ Palin attempted to clean up her tainted image by suggesting the clothing was only purchased for the Republican National Convention and had remained on the campaign jet during many of her campaign stops.⁴⁶ Adding to the controversy was running mate, Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who praised Palin for bucking the Republican political machine by wearing her favorite consignment store clothing, rather than the stylist-selected and rather expensive wardrobe.⁴⁷ With McCain’s comments, talk of waste and out-of-touch politicians surfaced and haunted the Republican ticket throughout the election.

ANN ROMNEY

As the wife of 2012 Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Ann Romney had to exude images of loving wife, savvy businesswoman, doting mother, and potential first lady to the American public. Perception that the Republican Party was unable to understand middle class America permeated media discussion of the election, with much of the discourse centered around Romney’s fashion selections and the prices thereof. Ongoing comparison to Michelle Obama ensued, with Romney receiving criticism for her oft-expensive selections and dowdy fashion style, or the blatant political subtext of Romney wearing an American designer Obama had yet to wear in the four years Obama had been first lady.⁴⁸

Romney’s fashion throughout the campaign was based as much in faith as in wearability, with a majority of her wardrobe subscribing to Mormon garment doctrine intertwined with fashionable statements appropriate for a first lady to wear. Romney often selected well-known political designer Alfred Fiandaca, who has designed conservative clothing for former first ladies such as Nancy Reagan and Ladybird Johnson.⁴⁹ Criticism of the Romney’s fashion selection ranged from labeling her selections as dowdy to calling the styling housewife chic. Romney’s clothing choices were obvious attempts at dressing how she (or her stylists) thought a first lady should dress, and when she deviated from the formula, the result was frumpy and wrinkled with a side of 1950s housewife—the ideal combination for fashion-frustrated news media focused on highlighting presidential fashion in the absence of legitimate political commentary.⁵⁰

Even in media coverage which purports to be politically-informing, Romney’s fashion snuck into the discussion. When visiting the polls on Election Day to cast her vote, news accounts of the visit featured a lavish description of Romney’s blue coat.⁵¹ While it can be assumed no discussion of her voting selections is necessary, the imagery of Romney alongside her presidential hopeful husband carries no description of the suit Mitt Romney is wearing.



By Gage Skidmore from Peoria, AZ, U.S. [CC-BY-SA-2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

IT COST HOW MUCH?

When Michelle Obama wears a particular item of clothing, the talk is frequently of who designed it. In most instances, discussion of cost is secondary. During the 2012 campaign, however, discussion of Ann Romney's fashion invariably centered on cost, not designer.

Female political figures are expected to dress the part at all times. However, when it comes to the cost of the fashion, the American media can be harsh and judgmental of the selections, and when doing so, the media has a tendency to selectively apply criticism to varying degrees.⁵²

Throughout her time as the first lady, Obama has taken a bold stand to wear American designers which are accessible and affordable for the average American, and mix in fringe designers with flair.⁵³ While Obama has been criticized for her fashion choices, she remains iconic in her efforts to routinely relate to the American public through conservatively-priced fashion selections.⁵⁴ According to Wilkinson, Obama's clothing selections for the 2012 campaign sent a message of "accessibility in the face of economic hardship."⁵⁵ As the wife of the Democratic leader, the message is subtle, yet appropriate.

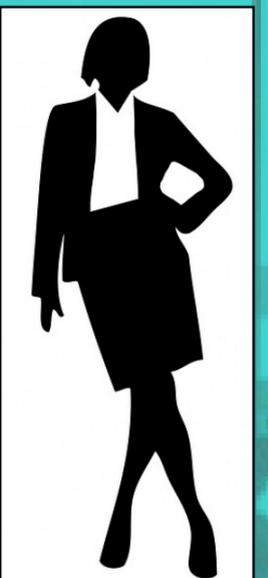
Interestingly, however, media coverage of Obama's fashion has not always been fair and balanced in relation to other female political figures. Rather, the traditionally-liberal media has been supportive of the liberal first lady, and routinely overlooked her penchant for rather expensive sweaters.⁵⁶ Obama has enjoyed sartorial scrutiny based not on the cost of her fashion, arguably on the shoulders of the American public, but rather as fashion choices themselves, be it appropriately casual and purposely puffed-up.

Take for example the 2008 United States presidential election cycle, when "pit bull in lipstick" Sarah Palin and the Republican party took harsh criticism for the wardrobe expenses incurred in their failed bid for the White House.⁵⁷ Palin walked into the spotlight as *everywoman*, but the image was blown wide open with media coverage of the Republican Party's \$150,000 shopping spree at high-end department stores to dress up the vice president candidate.⁵⁸ All it took was a single story about the costs of creating Palin into the perfect candidate compared to the debt of the average American, and the chasm between the Republican Party and the American people widened.

In 2012, the ongoing media comparisons between First Lady Michelle Obama and Ann Romney followed a prescribed formula; criticize Romney for frivolous fashion expenses and praise Obama for accessibility, affordability, and appropriateness.⁵⁹ Romney suffered endless press for her selections, which were often perceived as unattainable for the average American and reflective of the Republican party's disconnect from the American public. Despite her best efforts to convey messages of accessibility, even Romney's "off-the-rack," but nonetheless expensive, wardrobe took heat.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

All across the world, women's clothing choices are politicized and nuanced. Choices are cultivated by culture, belief systems, and ingrained religious interpretations. It is a double standard which conveys muddled messages to women: be assertive, but not too much, lest you be labeled. Dress in a conservative, feminine manner, but do not show cleavage.



For women in politics, it is a delicate balance of power versus perception, and a blatant contradiction. The rules are not applied uniformly; one woman can successfully achieve powerful dressing through glamorous or elegant clothing, while another needs to incorporate average, demure, or even matronly clothing to achieve the same power. The context of the clothing and the wearer are essential to properly conveying the political message for women. One can easily rationalize the difference in power dressing for women in politics and the media's insatiable need to sensationalize the clothing: a feminine wardrobe is far more diverse, more ambiguous, and carries far more potential to be controversial or polarizing in politics, than wardrobe options for men.



Politics is serious business, where every nuance of a candidate's behavior and experience is dissected. For women in politics, discussion of fashion creeps in, resulting in a combination of battle for fashion power and demeaning commentary on fit, style, and cost. With the continued strength of media messaging, the mixed message of fashion as related to politics is far more impactful. Voting constituencies need to believe in the authority and leadership of political figures, and fashion commentary mixed with legitimate political coverage undermines the message. Females involved in politics who successfully strike the delicate balance and incorporate fashion into their daily communications as a vehicle to convey their political message or enhance their popularity will ultimately benefit.

The challenge remains placing focus where appropriate, and with myriad blogosphere outlets reporting their own version of the news, female political figures will have to continue to dig out from under their fashion to lay their politics on the stage. Until women are treated equally in society and on the job, the so-called fairer sex will continue to be objectified and sexualized, regardless of the number of degrees on their office walls or their employment success.

End Notes

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