

Fashion as Your Ally: Analyzing Coverage on the Sartorial Choices of Politicians

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Abstract

“I once had a president spending 15 minutes talking to me about his tie when we could have been discussing the language of a peace accord,” Bennet Ratcliff, an international political consultant, told Vanessa Friedman, the Fashion Director and Chief Fashion Critic of The New York Times. In my paper, I would like to look at how fashion journalists, specifically Vanessa Friedman of The New York Times and Robin Givhan of The Washington Post, cover the dressing practices of politicians and their deeper indications. Examining the historical background of the relationship between fashion and politics, I intend to examine how Ms. Friedman’s and Ms. Givhan’s coverage facilitates the discussions and debates of political issues and invites a wider range of readers to decode the omnipresence of fashion in current political events. Using Agnès Rocamora’s study on mediatization as my theoretical framework, I reject the notion that focusing on the sartorial choices of politicians trivializes the “bigger issues” and deflects the attention of the public to frivolity. Politicians’ manipulation of their images through clothes, hairstyles and accessories, contributes to the construction of their agenda and public identities. Drawing upon Rocamora’s concept of practicing the mediatized self in the fashion world that is moulded by and for media, as well as Joanne Entwistle’s concept of fashion as a “situated bodily practice”, I conclude that the sartorial choices of politicians embellish not only their appearances but also their messages. Under the widespread assault on mainstream media and journalists by the current administration in the United States, I argue that analysis of the sartorial choices of politicians in the media, which unpack the subtle changes and unspoken messages through visual signals, will offer a meaningful and interesting scope to look at how the mediatization of fashion is adopted and utilized and advance our understandings of the relationship between fashion and politics.

Keywords: Fashion and politics; fashion journalism; fashion criticism; mediatization of fashion; gender

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