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(Strong Women)

The Power of Dressing — How Female Politicians Use Clothes To Send A Message

From Vice President Kamala Harris' inauguration coat to AOC's bright red lipstick, politicians are using fashion for more than just a style moment.

by **HILARY GEORGE-PARKIN**

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As Vice President Kamala Harris was sworn in at the Jan. 20 inauguration ceremony, she made history — not only as the first woman, Black woman, and South Asian-American woman elected to the position, but also as the first to take the oath of office wearing something other than a suit and tie. While secondary to her political achievements, the image of Harris in a bright purple Christopher John Rogers coat — the color, symbolic of the unity between Democratic blue and Republican red and the designer, a Black, queer Louisiana native — will be an essential part of her legacy.

The same was true of her ensemble the night prior to the inauguration at a memorial for the more than 400,000 Americans who died as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic: Harris wore a camel coat by Pyer Moss' Kerby Jean-Raymond, a Haitian-American designer who, early in the pandemic, converted his New York City office into a donation center for personal protective equipment.

Far beyond mere fashion statements, Harris' choices set the tone for those who eventually follow in her footsteps. "This is the start of the narrative of what women and fashion and politics means and looks like for the next generation," says Lauren A. Rothman, a Washington, D.C.-based image coach and the founder of Styleauteur, to TZR. "We're shaping [it] for the daughters out there."



Rob Carr/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Unlike First Ladies, for whom the U.S. has a long frame of reference — from Jackie Kennedy's pillbox hats to Melania Trump's skyscraper heels — female elected officials are still, in many cases, charting new territory, including with what they wear. "The framework is really still being worked out for what women in power look like in this country," says Rothman.

With a record-number of women serving in Congress (just over a quarter of all current members of the Senate and House of Representatives are women, according to Pew Research Center) and Vice President Harris as second-in-command, this moment has the potential to help create that framework. Already, we've seen how savvy many of these leaders are in using clothing and beauty to further their political messages, and how effective a tool like even a pair of Converse sneakers can be when it's worn by a presidential candidate.

While women may not be able to rely on their male peers' uniform of a black or navy suit to project an image of power, what they wear instead can tell a far more powerful story. Democratic congresswomen created some of the most memorable visuals of the Trump presidency by wearing "suffragette white" to the 2017 joint address to Congress and 2019 State of the Union — a color chosen to honor the legacy of the voting rights movement and show solidarity with women across the country. Harris, too, chose a white pantsuit for her acceptance speech in November, driving home her message of gratitude for all the women who paved the way for her success.

By aligning her ensemble with the speech's themes, she tapped into another layer of communication — one that also allowed her to make a sly reference (via a pussybow blouse) to

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he former President Trump's most infamous misogynistic remark without having to so much
is say his name.

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"Humans are very visual creatures," says Sonya Gavankar, a faculty member at The Campaign School at Yale University who teaches a session called "Dress to Win." "[Clothing] is a way of very quickly showing what team you're on and showing what side you're on... it's taking a stand without opening your mouth. Then we can go even further and we can plead our case. Then we can tell our story, then we can speak truth to power."

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Many of the trailblazing women who came before Harris used fashion as a tool for commanding attention in what was then a nearly all-male field. There was Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress and, in 1972, the first woman to run for president, who wore bold geometric prints and cat-eye glasses to speak out against racism and the Vietnam War. At this year's inauguration, Rep. Barbara Hall (D.-Calif.) wore a string of pearls that once belonged to the late congresswoman, tweeting, "Because of Shirley Chisholm, I am. Because of Shirley

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Whisholm, Vice President Harris is." Or Bella Abzug, who earned a seat in 1970 with the campaign slogan "This woman's place is in the House — the House of Representatives," and who was rarely spotted without one of her distinctive wide-brim hats. Neither women shied away from bright colors — even (or perhaps especially) when facing down rooms of men in dark suits.

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"You really see it from the beginning," says Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, a historian specializing in U.S. women's and gender history. "I think [female] politicians, because they are entering this very masculine space and very masculine world, they want to be there and to claim their right to be there, but still maintain their femininity." Today, she says, politicians like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) uphold this tradition, expanding the vocabulary of Washington's power wardrobe to include emerald sheath dresses and fuchsia pantsuits.

Most notable throughout this past year, though, has been Pelosi's collection of masks: Since mandating face coverings on the floor of the House to combat the spread of the coronavirus, she has made a point of coordinating her masks with her outfits. The protective accessories — printed with butterflies, florals, and arty brush strokes, and often purchased from a local shop called Donna Lewis — have been a stylish bit of flair, yes. But more than that, they've served as a



ointed reminder of the former president's repeated refusal to take such public health measures seriously.

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In the steadfastly traditional environment of Capitol Hill, even small gestures at personal style can make a statement. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) has made red lipstick her signature, the shade a nod to her Puerto Rican roots and a campaign-trail shortcut to feeling instantly more pulled-together, she told *Vogue* in a "Beauty Secrets" video. "Being Latina, this is very much our culture, where we come from. I will wear a red lip when I need a boost of confidence," she said.

For Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.), frank discussions about Black hair — first about the Senegalese twists and braids she wore in the run-up to her 2018 victory, and then, last year, about living with alopecia — have resonated with women around the country. As she told The Root in January 2020, gaining new confidence in her baldness meant letting go of a lot of shame. "It's about self-agency. It's about power. It's about acceptance," she said. Knowing this, her style choices — chunky earrings, jewel-tone blouses, a leather dress on the House floor — seem all the more impactful.



Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc./Getty Images

The shift away from playing it safe is a gradual one in part because women have been told for so long that fashion and beauty are trivial interests. "We want to be respected for our minds. So we think, well, we'll just dress in the most obvious way in the hopes that we are recognized for our brilliance," says Gavankar. "And I think now we are seeing women who are far more comfortable in speaking their mind and being respected, so they therefore dress in a way that helps tell their story."

The more a politician is in the public eye, the more their clothing choices will be scrutinized — whether they're wearing a Ralph Lauren coat that's been carefully selected by a stylist or a pair of mittens gifted by a supporter. The question then is what will they say while they have your attention?

"The stage creates an opportunity, and when you have that spotlight, you want to do all the right things with it that you can," says Rothman. "Your clothing often signals so many messages, so why not signal one of strength and confidence? That's what it's really about."

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Michelle Williams Is
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