

Fashion's underappreciated role in presidential politics

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Does a well-dressed president make for a better president? Yes, says political scientist David O'Connell. According to new research published in the journal *White House Studies*, O'Connell, an associate professor of political science at Dickinson College who studies American politics with a focus on religion and pop culture, argues style plays an underappreciated role in presidential politics and has meaningful consequences for presidential power.

O'Connell examined first-person memoirs and historical news sources to demonstrate how presidents can accomplish three goals through their [style](#): communicate messages, enhance their political position and identify with important political constituencies. For example:

- President Clinton sent a message by choosing a tie with trumpets during the historic White House meeting between Israeli PM and Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat as a Biblical reference to the falling walls of Jericho.
- President Kennedy, who preferred shabby dress in his years as a Congressman, enhanced his political position by updating his image to alleviate concerns about his youth.
- President George W. Bush identified with rural voters by favoring cowboy attire, sometimes even while he was in Washington.

O'Connell also makes an argument for formality. "Better-dressed presidents are more likely to be better presidents since they will avoid

the kinds of negativity that have historically greeted presidents who dressed more informally," O'Connell writes.

He points out some presidential style faux pas:

- President Obama, known for shrugging off fashion decisions, was criticized for wearing a tan suit, which was perceived as too casual, to an appearance discussing serious issues with Syria.
- Presidents Ford and Carter dressed casually to distinguish themselves from President Nixon, whom they perceived to be an inaccessible, pomp-and-circumstance president. Carter was first [president](#) to appear before the country in a sweater, a much-lampooned fashion choice that still gets critics talking.
- President Clinton was so image conscious, he once closed half of LAX's runways for a haircut onboard an idling Air Force One by Beverly Hills hairstylist Christophe.
- President Nixon's failed photo-op trying to one-up a beachcombing, sun-kissed Kennedy by walking a California beach in dress pants, white shirt and shined, wingtip shoes.

While almost no political scientists have analyzed the implications of style, O'Connell argues it is no secret that groups in society often make political statements through what they choose to wear or not to wear. He concludes scholars would be wise to consider style more closely, as there is powerful evidence that appropriately fashionable presidents helped their causes, while style faux pas have done damage to others.

Provided by Dickinson College

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