

Vincent Harris  
The University of Texas  
Department of Communication Studies  
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Style and Politics: Pink Hair, Sloppy Dress, and the Romney Archetype

## INTRODUCTION

On November 9, 2011 Texas Governor Rick Perry effectively ended his Presidential campaign when, before a national audience, he mumbled around in an awkward fifty-two-second exchange in which he could not remember the third name of an agency he stated he would make “gone” when elected President. After mentioning the Departments of Commerce and Education, Perry famously ended the exchange with the word “oops.”

Just a little more than two months later, Perry quit his campaign and largely retreated from the public light. When Governor Perry re-emerged in what was to amount to a second run at the Presidency, it was with a new marquis style item: a



fresh pair of glasses. *The Los Angeles Times* wrote, “Will smart-looking glasses do the trick for Rick Perry?” *The Economist* quipped, “In defense of Rick Perry’s eyeglasses,” referring to the candidate by his accessory, not his name. The glasses became such an important part of the Governor’s rebranded style that they were used as the centerpiece of campaign material including the business cards of every campaign staffer. Rival Donald Trump even turned the glasses attack fodder when he proclaimed, “He (Rick Perry) put glasses on so people

think he's smart! It just doesn't work. You know, people can see through the glasses." (CNN) Stylistic choice had become a centerpiece of the Republican race for President.

But do voters actually care about whether a candidate for public office changes their style? This paper seeks insight into what modern day Americans find acceptable when it comes to the personal style of their elected officials. After beginning with a thorough review of relevant literature, the second section will discuss the set up of the online Google Consumer Survey. Lastly, findings will be explained in further detail with an eye towards potential future research and conclusions on how style is applicable in today's modern campaign environment.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The word style is amorphous and complex. Merriam-Webster defines style as, "a distinctive manner or expression." Urban Dictionary offers its top definition for style as, "The basic defining characteristics of a person, everything from talk, dress, hairstyle, demeanor, etc." When describing style, Stuart Ewen writes, "Style today is an incongruous cacophony of images, strewn across the social landscape. Style may be borrowed from any source and turn up in a place where it least expected. The stylish person may look like a duchess one week, a murder victim the next" (All Consuming Images, 14). This paper will focus on style as chosen visual expression by public officials and as a heuristic for voters to make judgment shortcuts about candidates for office.

The most cited and accepted voting behavior theories see voters as rational actors who consistently update opinions about political candidates based

on pertinent policy information (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991), but modern technology has added a new dimension to study as political communication has become increasingly continuous and observable. Visual cues have become more important for voters as they process a barrage of information consumed through television and social media. Albeit titled in hyperbole, “Elected in 100 Milliseconds” is a recent study that discusses visual appearance as a critical shortcut for voters, many whom are inundated with excess political information (Olivola and Todorov 2010). The study takes direct aim at the heart of political science research and opens the door for further study in the field of cognitive psychology as it relates to voter behavior.

The mediums in which political candidates are interacting and persuading voters have evolved and fragmented over the past couple of decades. As the central medium of content dissemination, television has placed a new importance on the role of image (Baird 2003) in politics. With television, voters began to formulate candidate preferences based on more information than the candidate’s stated policy positions. During the first televised Presidential Debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, voters reached different conclusions on who won the debate, depending on if they watched the debate on television or listened to it on the radio (Street 1997). Nixon’s poor visual performance hurt his ability to persuade. The visual appearance of politicians has since become an important factor in voting behavior (Lenz and Lawson 2008).

Nonverbal communication through visual aids such as style are also important as they allows voters to quickly gain insight on the implied values of a

candidate for office. While most American politicians tend to share similar conservative style schematics (a suit and tie), they do sometimes express themselves through subtle changes like unique hairstyles or clothing colors (Palana 2012). The way a politician dresses and chooses to express themselves with style can give insight into their background and who they are, beyond their spoken policy positions. When looking to appeal to broad audiences within the American majoritarian electoral framework, many politicians look to avoid social stigmas associated with certain styles. For example, studies have shown that people with tattoos and body piercings are more likely to have engaged in behaviors such as drug use and suicide (Carroll et al. 2002; Lauman 2006) and exotic hairstyles, such as mohawks, have been considered markers of cultural deviance (Nathanson, Paulhus, Williams 2006).

When compared to the abundance of literature related to voting decisions as correlated with policy positions or pocket-book (Markus 1988) incentives, there has been little attention given to visual communication as an important determining variable. Most of the existing research relates to the physical appearance of politicians and the positive effects that are garnered simply from having been born with societally judged good looks. Naturally attractive people generate positive effects for themselves including more precious television time for better-looking politicians (Waisfel-Manor and Tsfati 2011) and favorable vote outcomes if their style is presented flatteringly (Rosenberg, McCafferty, et. al 1987). In one study, children were fairly accurate at picking election victors based solely on inherent visual traits of candidates (Antonakis and Dalgas 2009).

Alternatively, a politician's appearance can also be detrimental to voter's assumptions on issues like trustworthiness (Poutvaara, Henrik and Berggren 2009) if they reflect an image that is considered unattractive. Other recent research supports the notion that while visual-information might be an important short cut for low-information voters, it is still not an important factor in making a voting decision (Hayes, Lawless, Baitinger 2013). Their study is one of few that focused not on the natural attractiveness of the candidates, but instead on their public stylistic presentation. The more disheveled and sloppy a candidate's style was described in faux news articles, the less favorable voters opinions of them were.

Expressed style as it relates to voter preference is very different than the more researched concepts of physical attraction and beauty. Someone can be considered physically unattractive but project flattering style, or be very attractive but project sloppy style. While physical attributes such as facial size and dimension are sometimes impossible to manipulate, those wishing to run for public office can more easily alter personal style and might do so more often if they knew it affected voting behaviors.

Despite the important role our politicians have in our society, there is very little academic research on the role of their expressed style and its relationship to public opinion. This paper looks to help fill in that gap by building upon existing theories looking at voters use of shortcuts and heuristics when making voting decisions. A politician's style as expressed through clothing, hairstyle, and other

visual variables all form a system on which voters can form opinions and judgments on politicians.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey was performed through usage of Google Consumer Surveys, an online survey research tool by Google that has been found to be more accurate “than both the probability and non-probability based Internet panels in three separate measures” (McDonald, Mohebbi, Slatkin). Google Consumer Surveys was used because of its ability to generate a large sample population quickly due to its extensive online reach. Additionally, Consumer Surveys provides the researcher an easy to use interactive platform from which to manipulate subsamples of respondents for further analysis.

### *Subject Population*

The population surveyed were Internet users from the general population in the United States who were consuming content on the Google Consumer Surveys publisher networks. Publisher networks are websites or content portals that sell advertising through Google. Google Consumer Surveys operates as a roadblock to premium content on websites such as *The New York Times*. Before a visitor can access their desired story or content, they are prompted to take part in a survey. The user has the option of taking the survey in front of them or choosing another survey by clicking a button titled “skip survey.” The sample was weighted to try and generalize to the average population of American Internet users.

The survey ran April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016 until April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The survey continued to run until it reached an  $n$  of 1,049 completed surveys of all nine-survey questions. Because participants could exit the survey at any time, there was drop off with every subsequent question as the survey continued.

A digital tracking cookie was used in order to ensure participants couldn't participate multiple times. Google uses browser history, first-party information, and other online data points in order to build a model of each online user of their likely age and gender. Using this model, the survey was weighted against the entire Internet population to ensure a representative sample. If, for example, more men than women were completing the survey, Google's algorithm would weight the survey to men until the number of women caught up and became representative.

### *Method*

*Stimulus Materials.* Various photographs were used as stimuli and were accompanied with related text questions. The photographs were taken from stock photography websites and found online through Google images. The content on them varied from clothing items, to stock photography models, and real world politicians.

### *Procedure*

Participants were asked to answer a series of questions relating to politics and style. These included multiple-choice questions relating to images, open-ended questions relating to images, and text questions relating to personal opinions of political style. The questions solicited personal judgments in

relationship to the stimuli. 1,970 people answered the first question and 1,049 of those people finished all nine questions. The questions appeared in the same order for every participant.

FIGURE ONE  
Example of Google Consumer Survey and its placement as a roadblock to premium content

The screenshot shows a web page from 'The Daily Globe' with a navigation bar at the top containing 'Top Stories', 'World', 'US', 'Business', 'Entertainment', and 'Sports'. The main article is titled 'Fair Use Digital Circulation Strategy Information Overload' by Matthew Dodd, dated January 16, 2013. The article text is partially visible, mentioning 'Jurgen Habermas R&D', 'Android cops beat The Weekender', 'mathewi Tim Carmody', 'attracting young readers tweets', 'collaboration tags the medium is the message', 'blog plagiarism horse-race coverage advertising the other longer Book Review. ...'. A photo of a busy city street is shown. Below the article, a green banner reads 'Please complete the following survey to access this premium content.' The survey question is 'Question 1 of 9 or fewer: Scenario: Both of these men are running for office. Which one would you vote for?' and shows two photos of men. Below the question are options: 'OR', 'Show me a different question', and 'Skip survey'. At the bottom of the survey box are 'Google', 'INFO', and 'PRIVACY' links. On the right side of the page, there is a 'Popular on The Daily Globe' sidebar with categories: 'MOST EMAILED' and 'MOST VIEWED'. Under 'MOST VIEWED', there are links for 'OPINION: A Line in the Sand Against Rate Hikes', 'ENTERTAINMENT: A-List Guide to Oscar Parties', 'THE BUZZ: Memorable Quotes from 2012', 'SPORTS VIDEO: LeBron James Youngest to Score 20000', and 'HOME & GARDEN: How to Plant a Winter Garden'.



FIGURE TWO  
Question Five of the Survey as shown to a participant

Please complete the following survey to access this premium content.

Question 5 of 9 or fewer:

Regarding your personal opinion, would you think less of a man running for office if he had....

Check all answers that apply

- Tattoos on his arms
- Dyed pink hair
- Large gage earrings
- A mohawk
- Painted Fingernails
- A tongue ring

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- None of the above


NEXT

FIGURE THREE  
Question Eight of the Survey as shown to a participant

Please complete the following survey to access this premium content.

Question 8 of 9 or fewer:

Describe the style of this man in a few words



Enter your answer

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NEXT

## Results

When analyzing the data, I addressed several questions. The first is whether or not there is a difference in perceived style of Republican and Democrat politicians. The results suggest that there is a difference. As seen in Figure 4, respondents were asked if an image of a young Caucasian man with arm tattoos, relaxed dress, and gage earrings was believed to reflect a Republican or Democrat running for office. Overwhelmingly, the respondents answered Democrat.

FIGURE 4  
Results of Question Four

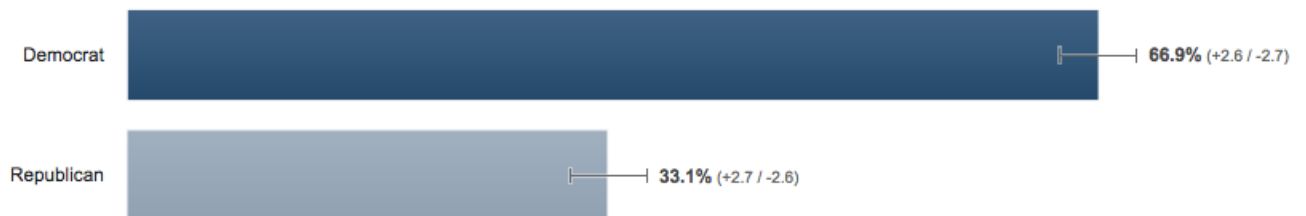
MENU WITH IMAGE

Scenario: this man is running for office. Which party do you believe he's running as?



Results for respondents with demographics. Weighted by Age, Gender, Region. (1198 responses) ?

Winner statistically significant. ?



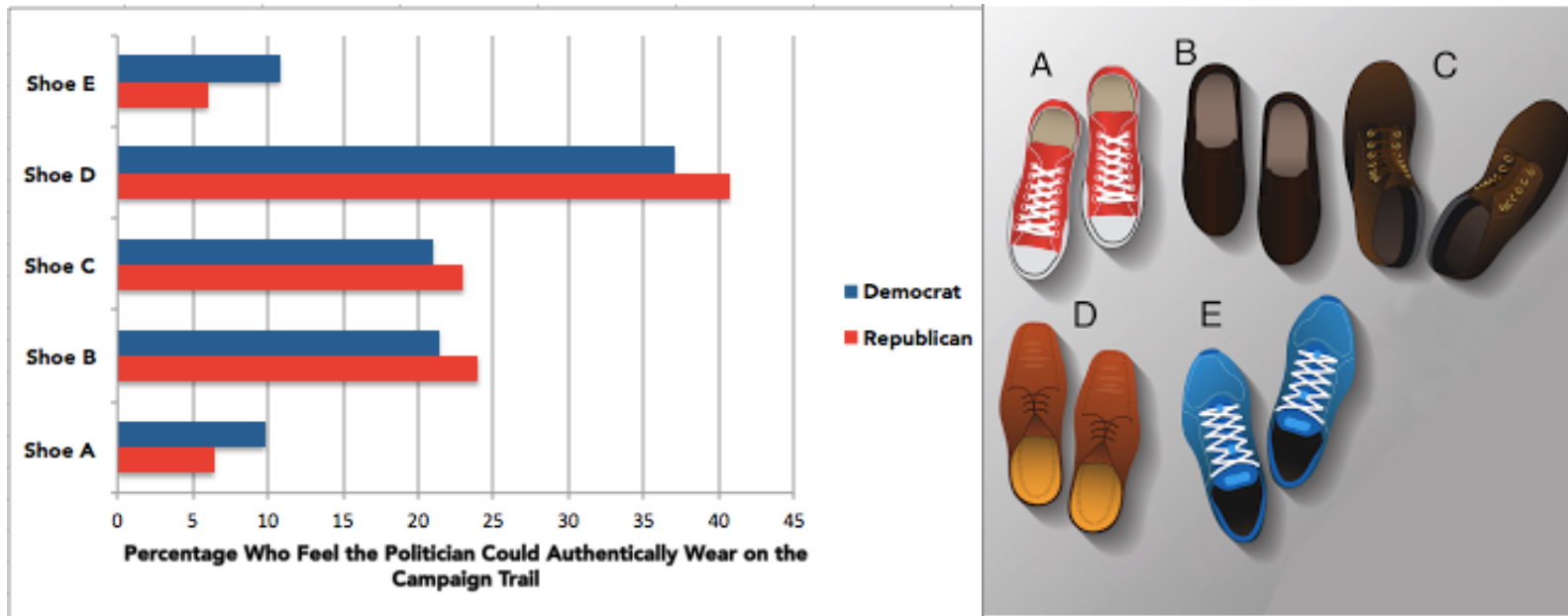
The results were significant and lopsided with a two (66.9%) to one (33.1%) margin in favor of the man in the image being a Democrat. There are many individual variables found within the image that could have each led to the

respondent's conclusion, but together these variables formed a system of style that respondents felt represented an accepted style of a Democrat.

Questions six and seven showed two identical sets of shoes that varied in style and usage. The shoes were presented and respondents were asked to choose which pair that a Republican and Democrat could authentically wear on the campaign trail. The respondents could only select one pair from the choices. Traditional business shoes were chosen as the most authentic for both hypothetical candidates, but respondents were divided on the styles of shoes they felt a Democrat could wear. As seen in Figure Five, Shoe A is a pair of Converse shoes that are traditionally worn as part of a hipster or relaxed style system. Respondents felt that a Democrat could more authentically wear these shoes than a Republican. Pair E, blue sports sneakers, was also chosen by participants to be shoes a Democrat could more authentically wear than a Republican. Pairs B, C, and D, which can be characterized as more bland and without bright colors, were chosen by a slightly higher percentage of participants to be more authentically Republican.

These questions sought to further understand how Americans view the relationship between party label and style choice. The respondent's answers to both sets of questions showcase that the public believes the Democrats are the party that can more authentically vary their style and dress than the Republicans.

FIGURE FIVE  
Results of Questions 6 and 7



The second question addressed in the survey sought to discover if people have predisposition to liking a certain type of style in politicians. Do people believe that politicians need to reflect a specific style? If so, what style do people expect their politicians to wear? The results clearly showed that not only do people believe their politicians all dress stylistically uniform but that they think less of their politicians if they deviate from their preconceived and expected stylistic notions.

Question 1 offered participants two images of the same male Stock Photo model. In both images the model has the same haircut and facial expression in order to control for variance. The question asked was: "Scenario: Both of these men are running for political office. Which one would you vote for?"

## FIGURE SIX

Stock photo of the same man wearing a suit and tie and relaxed outfit



64% of those surveyed chose to select the image of the man in a suit and tie as their vote preference, while only 36% chose to vote for the man wearing more casual attire. The vote spread between the images was smaller among those aged 25-44, but in all demographics, respondents clearly chose the style of a suit and tie over the more relaxed style in their voting preference.

Question 5 offered the most interesting data set for analysis. The question sought insight into participant's opinions on individual stylistic characteristics that are uncommonly worn by the majoritarian population. Respondents were asked to select any combination of six style markers that if worn, would make them think less of a man running for office. The respondents could also select none of the above if they believed that none of the markers, if worn, had an impact on their opinion of a male candidate. Results showed that a majority of respondents

found large gage earrings, dyed pink hair, a tongue ring, painted fingernails, and a mohawk as style choices that would encourage them to think less of a male running for office.

A recent survey concluded twenty percent of Americans have tattoos (Blanton 2014) but 31% of those surveyed on Question 5 answered that they would think less of a man running for office if he had tattoos on his arms. The results showed that across every measured demographic, the stylistic choices presented had a level of negative effect on voters' opinions of candidates for office.

The last survey questions offered respondents the opportunity to share their opinions about the style of images by soliciting feedback through open-ended answers. Question eight showed a campaign image of Braddock, Pennsylvania, Mayor John Fetterman, who is known locally for his grungy style and tattoos. Question nine showed an image of Australian Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull wearing a suit and tie. These two men were chosen because while they both represent electoral constituencies, they are relatively unknown in image to the broad American public. Both questions asked, "describe the style of this man in a few words."

Figure seven shows a word-cloud built by Google Consumer Surveys that grouped the 1,066 responses about the dress of Prime Minister Turnbull, according to individual words mentioned in each answer. The larger and bolder the word, the more it was mentioned as a response.



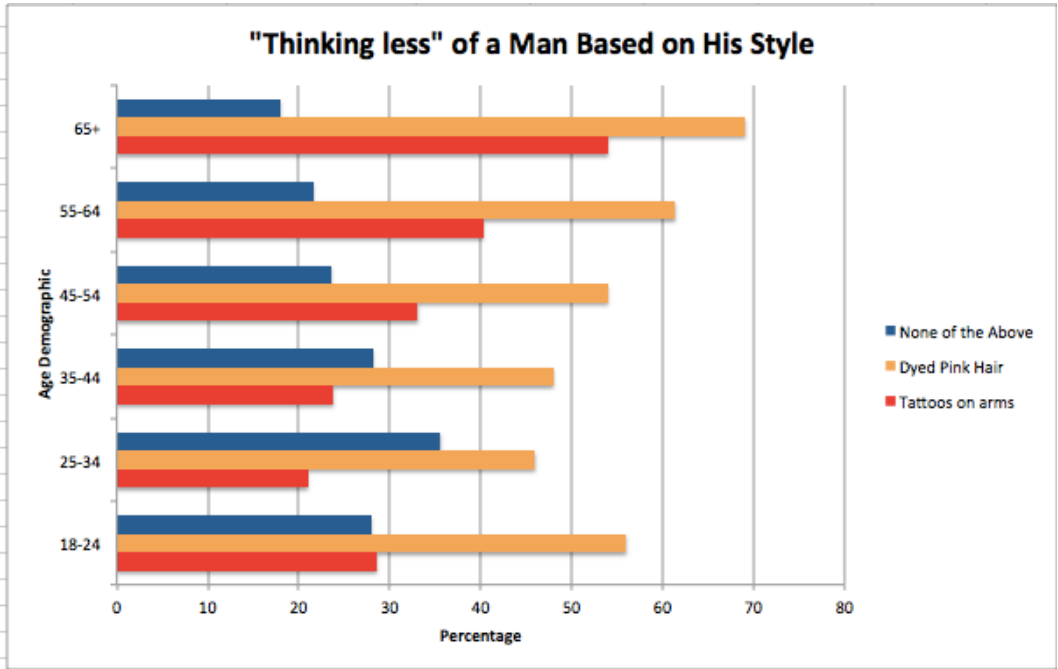




**ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION**

Strong demographic patterns were found across survey questions. Age was a big differentiator in stylistic preference. Question five saw a large range discrepancy in answers between age groups: more than 60% of those surveyed over the age of 65 responded negatively to each individual style choice of dyed pink hair, a tongue ring, large gage earrings, painted fingernails, or a Mohawk. This same demographic (65+) had only 18% choose “none of the above” as impacting their opinion, showing a large majority felt at least one of the style choices was in poor taste. Contrasting the older demographic were those aged 25-34 who answered the highest “none of the above” of any age demographic, with 35.6% of responses. Additionally, none of the alternative style choices received negative feedback from a majority of respondents in the 25-34 demographic. To further illustrate the age divide, Figure Seven offers three of the style answers compared across age demographics.

**FIGURE SEVEN**  
Percentage of respondents choosing None of the Above, Dyed Pink Hair, or Tattoos on his arms, as compared across age demographics



Although expected, the more accepting nature of the younger age demographics was constant throughout the survey. Younger age demographics were more open to alternative styles for politicians and in general offered more liberal opinions on what they felt was appropriate style. The older age demographics offered more conservative opinion when it came to style and responded more negatively to styles alternative to the traditional business attire worn by most politicians today.

## **CRITIQUE**

There was an error in the fielding of questions two and three as they relate to two images of women running for office. Participants were asked if the styles worn by the women encouraged or discouraged them from voting for them. The researcher intended only two answer choices for the participants, but a third appeared as an error on both questions. The third answer choice, "7 stars," did not make logical or relational sense to the question being asked. Despite the flawed answer set, the results of both questions were still statistically significant. The woman shown wearing a business professional style saw 63% of respondent's answer that her style is one that "encourages me to vote for her." The woman shown wearing a more casual style had 57.5% of respondents' answer that her style is one that "turns me off from voting for her." While interesting insight can still be gained from these results, because of the flawed answer set, the questions were not included in the results section of this paper.

Outside of the previously mentioned removed questions, there were no other questions about the relationship between women in politics and their

expressed style. The media has made issue of former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's and former Alaska Governor, Sarah Palin's style, and it would offer additional helpful insight to analyze if the style of female candidates for office is treated by the public in a different light than male candidates are.

It would be pertinent to retest question five without using descriptive words that could have biased the results. Words like "large" to describe the gage earrings and using the plural version of "tattoo" may have added more negative intensity to the way the style choices were described.

While the survey offers valuable insight into Americans perceptions of style and its relationship to politics, there should be caution in generalizing findings across all levels of politics. For example, the more grungy style of Mayor John Fetterman may have had a different impact on voting behavior in his campaign for local office than his campaign for the more prestigious office of United States Senate. Follow-up research is necessary to help further understand the effect that political hierarchy has on voter perceptions of style.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study offers new information about the effect that clothing and style choice has on voter's perceptions of political candidates. Previous research has mostly focused on the effect that visual attractiveness has on voter preferences, but has left a research gap concerning study into expressed style. Because politicians are interested in electoral success, and style can be easily changed, this is a topic ripe for additional study. This paper offers only a summary of some of the more interesting insights and findings from the expansive survey results. If

voters use style cues in making electoral judgments, than why isn't every self-interested politician manipulating his or her style in ways to impact voter behavior?

Modern media has made visual communication a critical component of an effective campaign operation. Voters are busy with the problems and daily routine of their own lives, and they use style as a heuristic to help them form conclusions and make shortcuts about candidates for office. Perhaps wisely reflecting the wishes of the majority of their constituencies, most candidates for public office express themselves as style clones of one another by wearing suits and ties. The average style of most candidates for public office could be idealized in former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, whose conservative business style and perfectly coifed hair is an archetype of contemporarily accepted style for politicians.

As this study showed, voters believe their politicians are most "authentic" when they don the style of a business professional. A majority of respondents thought less of a man running for office who strayed from the more conservative style system. When participants were offered a vote choice between a man in a suit or more relaxed attire, they overwhelmingly chose the man in the suit. Voters might themselves express alternative styles, but the majority are expecting and wanting their elected politicians to dress in business attire. Unique politicians like Mayor John Fetterman can wear alternative style authentically, but when that style is perceived as "lazy" and "sloppy," it can serve as an albatross to further career advancement. His grungy style might have properly reflected his blue-

collar background and constituency in his hometown, but voters across the country felt it unappealing.

The United States is a land in which the polity is free to express themselves through chosen style. Voters can dye their hair in bold colors, pierce their ears, or wear unique clothing. But when it comes to elected officials, this study shows that the polity appreciates stylistic homogeneity. By veering from the traditional uniform of a politician – suit and tie – a candidate for office risks negative effects as voters form opinions on whom to support at the ballot box.

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