



What's Hair Got to Do with It? Black Women's Bodies and the Traditional Look of Success in American Politics

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In the spring of 2006, then-Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney made national news when she claimed that U.S. Capitol Police officer Paul McKenna racially profiled her when he stopped her on the way into her office building. Congresswoman McKinney, who usually wears her hair in two thick braids on either side of her head, had just changed her hairstyle to a twist out – a technique that produces wavy or defined curls. Officer McKenna stated that he failed to recognize McKinney, and thus stopped her because of McKinney's new hairstyle and lack of lapel pin. Representative McKinney countered that her face should have been perfectly recognizable, because even though her hairstyle was altered, the shape of her nose, eyes, lips, and forehead remained the same. Without the familiar braids, she maintained, the officer only paid attention to her race.

The first Black woman elected to Congress from Georgia, Representative McKinney was very aware of the visual politics of her hair. As a Black woman with a new hair style, she felt she had been made to feel undistinguished, undistinguishable, and suspicious in the halls of Congress.

Framed as “much ado about a hairdo,” this incident highlights how race, gender, and perceptions of Black women's hair interact in the political realm. Regardless of whether this episode was an innocent mistake as Officer McKenna insisted, or a telling example of profiling as McKinney argued, it offers insights into American racial dynamics. In this instance and many others, we see that very personal decisions about matters such as styling one's hair are embedded in racialized and gendered norms that can create barriers and dilemmas for Blacks and women in politics.

Body Politics, Black Women, and American Politics

Dominant white beauty standards and gender norms that favor men set the backdrop for American politics. Because of this, African American women candidates and elected officials are forced to navigate a political landscape that is very different from the landscape experienced by people from other racial and ethnic groups – and substantially different from the political landscape experienced by Black men.

These unique challenges are especially evident when it comes to hair. Numerous Black women office-seekers and lawmakers I interview in my research describe how their hair and decisions about ways to wear it influence how they are viewed by colleagues or potential constituents. Many of these women also discuss skin tone. In other words, I find in my research that Black women candidates and lawmakers are keenly aware of how their bodies and physical experiences are racialized and gendered. They understand the ways in which their bodies fall outside the dominant constructions of beauty and femininity and experience the impact of race and gender-based stereotypes on how colleagues and voters perceive them.

Social science research consistently shows that women and minorities face disadvantages when crafting a professional image because of negative stereotypes, lower expectations, and cultural norms that advantage white, male standards of behavior and appearance.

- Since positive professional traits – ambition, competitiveness, and competence – are typically regarded as male characteristics, women face a double-bind in the workplace. If women *do* display these traits, they may face criticism for being “unfeminine,” but if they *do not* it may come at the expense of their professional advancement.
- Additional dilemmas face African American women, for whom hair choices and skin tones are often read as either unintended or intended personal and political statements. On the one hand, African American women’s natural hair – whether worn in an Afro, locks, twists, or braids – may connote a nationalistic or militant political posture to whites. On the other hand, straightened tresses – whether achieved through a chemical straightening process or with heat (that is, a press and curl) – may appear to indicate a mainstream political stance, assimilated to white norms. Black women candidates and lawmakers may alter their appearances to appear more feminine and to soften their racially-distinct features. Because voters form opinions about Black women based on their hair texture and style, Black women legislators and candidates may forgo Afro-centric styles in order to achieve their political goals in a white, male-dominated political system.

Physical markers of race and gender are jointly bound together for Black female candidates and legislators. Voters and colleagues frequently make assumptions about how a Black woman candidate will behave in office based on her appearance, particularly hair texture and style and skin tone. In practice, therefore, Black women all too often find that choices about hairstyles affect their political prospects. Styling one’s hair takes on an outsized significance.

Overcoming Body Bias toward Black Women in Politics

Important steps remain to be taken to establish a more level playing field for Black women in politics.

- Stereotypes and assumptions denigrating Blackness must be recognized as historically and socially conditioned. For example, it helps for everyone to realize that different hair types and skin tones are not valued equally in American culture and politics.
- False binaries about acceptable hairstyles and looks for female politicians must be questioned and set aside. Why, for example, is Michelle Obama’s style held up as the gold-standard for Black women in politics, while Black politicians with braids, dreadlocks, or Afros tend to be seen as less respectable and authoritative?
- Campaign managers, party recruiters, and training programs all should encourage female candidates, including African Americans, to present themselves in ways that feel authentic and comfortable. Everyone involved should accept that there is no “one size fits all” model for a compelling politician and an effective legislator.

Over time, such steps to shift American political culture will pay off. But until citizens and officials alike recognize the socially conditioned assumptions, stereotypes, and false binaries that denigrate Black women, these barriers for their equitable entry into and participation in politics will remain.

Read more in Nadia E. Brown, "It's More than Hair...And You Do Care: The Politics of Appearance for Black Women State Legislators" *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2, no. 3 (2014): 295-312.