



# Christine Blasey Ford and the complications of dressing to look believable

We care too much what women wear. Ford's navy suit puts the attention on her words.

By Eliza Brooke | Sep 27, 2018, 11:20am EDT



Christine Blasey Ford is sworn in before beginning her testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. | Win McNamee/Getty Images

Black turtlenecks, to avoid showing skin; old loafers, to deter accusations of being



attention-seeking; blazers, to telegraph seriousness. And, to prove that the investigation hadn't trampled her spirit, polka-dot flats.

In a **New York Times op-ed** published this January, Eva Hagberg Fisher explained the thought process that went into dressing for the legal events, television appearances, and meetings with lawyers and department chairs that ensued after she filed a sexual harassment complaint against her former graduate school adviser in 2016. Fisher's goal was to look believable, and she assembled a wardrobe that would help her accomplish that.

When someone comes forward with a sexual assault or misconduct claim, as Palo Alto University professor Christine Blasey Ford has with her testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, the attention shouldn't be on their clothes. But, of course, it is — not just because we all draw cues about a person based on their self-presentation, but because questions regarding harassment or assault all too often include the victim-blaming line, **“What were you wearing?”** In cases of sexual assault, dress can be used to discredit, and so the optics of an outfit matter very much when a person is pursuing disciplinary or legal action.

This is the context for **Ford's testimony against Kavanaugh**, which takes place today in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Ford says that when she and Kavanaugh were high school students, he forced himself on her at a party, attempted to take off her clothes, and put his hand over her mouth when she tried to scream.

Kavanaugh has denied these allegations, as well as those from **Deborah Ramirez**, an undergraduate classmate at Yale who says Kavanaugh exposed himself to her at a dorm party without her consent.

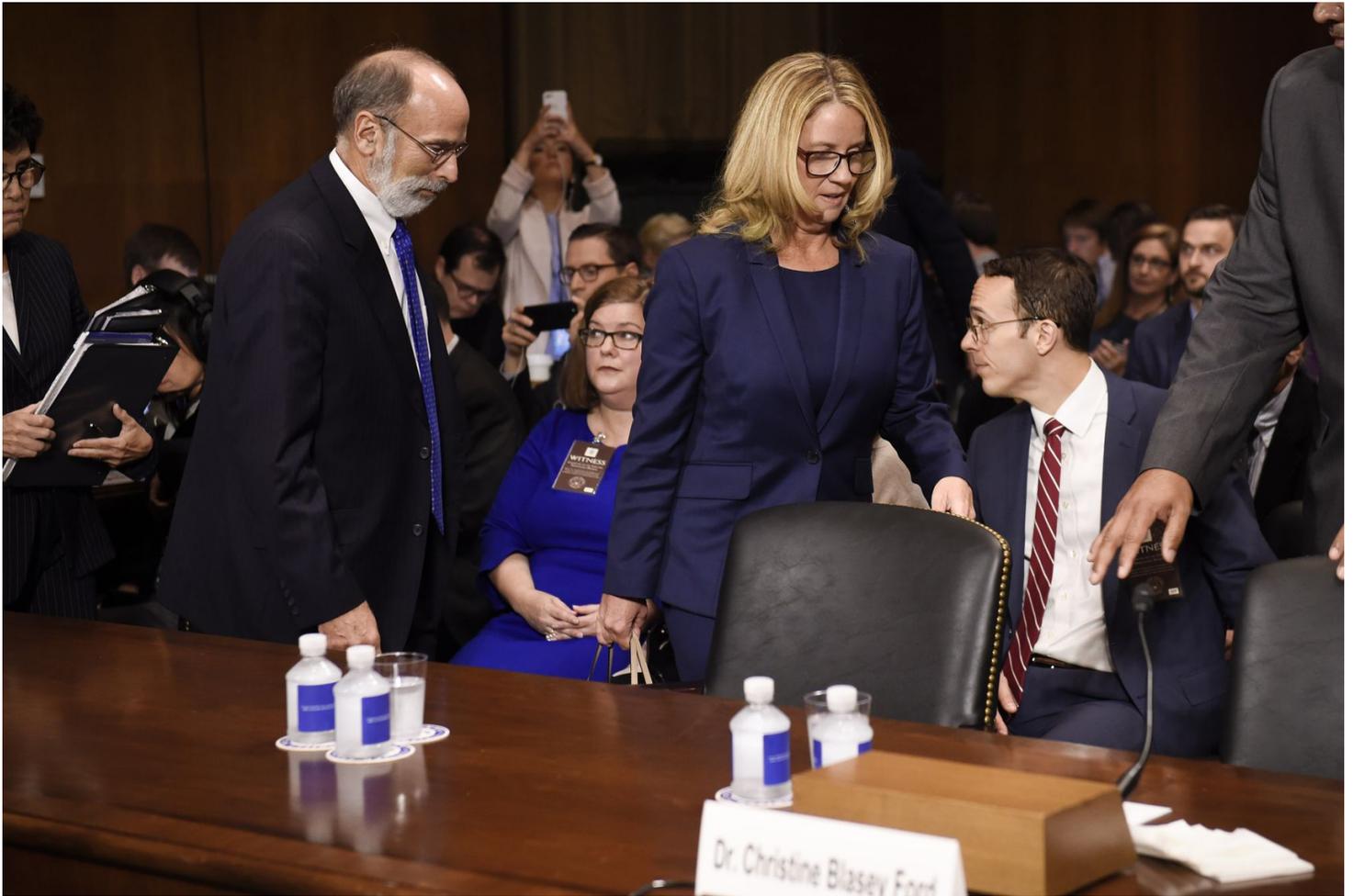
Ahead of the hearing, Ariel Colangelo, a former lawyer who has written about the sartorial scrutiny that **women in the legal field face on a daily basis**, said that one could expect Ford to “err on the side of being ultra-conservative and as non-interpretive

as possible” — that is, to deny her audience the ability to glean much of anything from her clothes and thus keep from them any further tools with which to undermine her.

It’s not just a woman’s outfit that people will pick apart in a setting like this, Colangelo says. It’s her makeup, her jewelry, how she wears her hair.

“What happens [at the hearing] should hinge on her words and her presentation of the facts and have nothing to do with what’s on her body,” says Colangelo. “And that’s so far from the reality.”

For Kavanaugh, the question of dressing to look believable is a much simpler one: He’ll no doubt wear the same kind of suit in which he usually makes public appearances, an outfit that’s coded neutral in a setting like this. Indeed, he won’t look all that different from the other men in the room.



Christine Blasey Ford arrives to give testimony on September 27, 2018. | Saul Loeb/Getty Images

## When testifying, Ford put the focus squarely on her words

To testify against Kavanaugh on Thursday morning, Ford wore a navy blazer with a navy shirt underneath. She wore her glasses. It's a professional, unremarkable look — one that wouldn't give onlookers much to talk about.

“This is not fashion week. This is not ‘What designer did she wear?’” said Lauren Rothman, a DC-based style consultant who works with clients in government and business, before the hearing began. “This is about messaging. The best advice that I can ever give someone who's facing the public eye is that you don't want to wear anything that's going to distract from your message.”

That's exactly what Ford did.

More significance could be drawn from a photograph of Ramirez **published by the New Yorker** last week. In the picture she stands in a field wearing jeans, an embroidered wrap, and a shirt that says "Puerto Rico" across the chest. That shirt takes on a pointed meaning in light of Kavanaugh's career trajectory. Her father is Puerto Rican; Kavanaugh was tapped for the nation's highest court by a president who has **drastically and repeatedly denied Hurricane Maria's death toll in Puerto Rico**, after **holding back on providing aid to the US territory** and blaming it for its struggle to deal with the storm's aftermath.

Ramirez's jeans and overall demeanor are notable as well. As the New York Times **reports**, Kavanaugh arrived at Yale from a much more privileged world than Ramirez did, and her casual styling, compared with Kavanaugh's standard suit and tie, signals relative approachability.



Protesters at the Supreme Court building wore teal in honor of the suit Anita Hill wore to testify against then-nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991. | Chet Strange/Getty Images

## Protesters in DC are wearing teal in honor of Anita Hill

Ford's testimony against Kavanaugh **undeniably recalls 1991**, when, in the lead-up to Justice Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation, Anita Hill testified that Thomas had sexually harassed her. Outside the Supreme Court building on Thursday morning, echoes of Hill were everywhere, in the form of protesters wearing teal as a tribute to the **striking suit** that she wore on that occasion.

In preparation for Thursday's rally, the National Organization for Women **wrote on its website**, "WEAR TEAL to support Dr. Blasey Ford. Anita Hill wore TEAL when she testified in 1991. Summon the courage and strength of Anita Hill when you support Dr.

Blasey Ford this week.”

Other protesters wore black T-shirts that said, “I am a survivor and I vote.” Some had messages like “Time’s Up” and “Me Too” written on the palms of their raised hands.

Dress figured into protests in the days leading up to Ford’s hearing. In solidarity with Ford, students and faculty at Yale Law School, Kavanaugh’s alma mater, **staged a sit-in** in the gothic Sterling Law Building — many of them wearing all black, as activists and actresses did **at the 2017 Golden Globes** to raise awareness for the Time’s Up organization.



Protesters gathered outside the Supreme Court building on the morning of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

As Rothman points out, color can be a powerful tool for those at the center of a hearing like this, either serving to magnify the spotlight already on them or allowing them to blend into the crowd. In a room full of black, navy, brown, and white, a burst of vibrant color — like the teal suit Hill wore in 1991 — can make a powerful statement. Ford chose the other route.

But outside the pale stone of the Supreme Court building, set against a cloudy sky, the protesters' teal — and, in effect, their message — popped unmistakably.

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