



Rolling up those sleeves: Pete Buttigieg "uniform" mixes function with campaign message

By Jeff Parrott South Bend Tribune Jun 3, 2019



South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg speaks at a fundraiser for his presidential campaign at the Wynwood Walls in Miami on May 20. Associated Press/LYNNE SLADKY

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At most media events and news conferences over his seven years as mayor, Pete Buttigieg wore the traditional male politician's outfit: dark suit, white shirt and tie.

Since launching his exploratory bid for president in January, candidate Buttigieg has kept the white shirt and tie — but lost the jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

His chief communications adviser, Lis Smith, calls it his "uniform." The look has been so consistent, whether he's speaking from a New Hampshire porch, visiting an Iowa union hall or appearing on a TV talk show, that some writers have called it his "signature" look.

It's also inspired some parody. On "Saturday Night Live" last month, actor Paul Rudd's Pete Buttigieg took his seat on "The View," and Kate McKinnon's Joy Behar asked, "How are you?"

Rudd, wearing a tie with a white shirt and rolled-up sleeves, held out his arms and replied, "I'm ready to work. See the exposed forearms?"

Smith said Buttigieg laughed at the caricature. On Twitter, Sacha Haworth, political director for American Bridge, a Democratic advocacy group, seemed less amused, tweeting, "Starting to think if female presidential candidates only rolled up their shirt sleeves more, they'd get more attention."

Since the beginning of civilization, politicians and leaders have obsessed over their appearance and the message it conveys to constituents. Many politicians hire stylists and image consultants to advise them on fashions, brands and colors to wear, always careful about what their appearance signals to voters.

Buttigieg is by no means the first to frequently wear a certain style. During the 2018 U.S. Senate campaign, for example, Indiana Republican Mike Braun stuck to a blue, open-collared shirt, prompting opponent Joe Donnelly to run a TV ad mocking it as an attempt by Braun to look more like an everyday Hoosier. But Braun won the election.

Tribune photo archives show Buttigieg in a tie and rolled-up sleeves only a few times before his presidential bid, such as Dyngus Day 2011, during his first mayoral campaign; a 2012 Mayor's Night Out (albeit in August); his visit to city firefighters in November 2014, shortly after his return from his Afghanistan deployment; and his visit with striking Honeywell workers in June 2016.

Rolling up the sleeves over the years with Mayor Pete



Tribune Photo/GREG SWIERCZ Pete Buttigieg discusses his campaign for mayor of South Bend Wednesday at his home in South Bend. Buy Now Greg Swiercz

So why is it the go-to look for Buttigieg now?

Smith said it comes entirely from Buttigieg himself and is not an adviser's "contrivance."

"It doesn't hurt that it underscores that he's a roll-up-your-sleeves, get-it-done kind of guy," she said. "In a race when you're running against a bunch of senators and congressmen, it's not bad for him to lean into that."

The cover of Buttigieg's book, "Shortest Way Home," which was released in February, shows him rolling up a sleeve — and even looking down at it.

But Smith said there was no advance planning and that "they were just going around South Bend taking photos and that was the one that really popped out."

That's about how it went down, but the photo wasn't entirely candid, said Buttigieg supporter Jacob Titus, the South Bend designer and photographer who shot the cover image. Buttigieg had shown up for the shoot about 5:30 p.m., with his sleeves rolled, wearing what he'd worn to work that day, and Titus asked him to unroll and roll his sleeves back up to capture the "movement and motion."

The picture shows Buttigieg standing in front of Chico's, a Mexican restaurant he likes on Western Avenue, which has received new curbs, sidewalks and decorative lampposts through his Smart Streets initiative.

"Western is a corridor that has seen a lot of change during Pete's tenure because of direct policies the administration put into place," said Titus, a partner in a local graphic design firm, Tutt & Carroll. "Some of that context then plays into wanting to communicate the kind of getting-to-work emotion that the sleeve rolling tends to communicate."

Smith said no one is advising Buttigieg on his clothing.

Someone should be, said Patsy Cisneros, the founder of Corporate Icon, a corporate consulting firm based in Los Angeles. Cisneros said if Buttigieg continues to avoid suit coats, he could ultimately be taken less seriously.

Cisneros, noting Buttigieg is running for president, not mayor, said she would advise him to wear a full suit more often because it befits the authority a president has.

"At some point in his presidential campaign, I would recommend to Pete Buttigieg to be seen and photographed wearing a variety of suits and blazers," Cisneros said. "The blazer and suits will represent his preparedness and credibility for interacting with world leaders in his role as president."

But Washington, D.C.-based fashion political consultant Lauren Rothman said Buttigieg's frequent look is helping him build a "brand presence" among the two dozen Democratic 2020 candidates by, ironically, being bland.

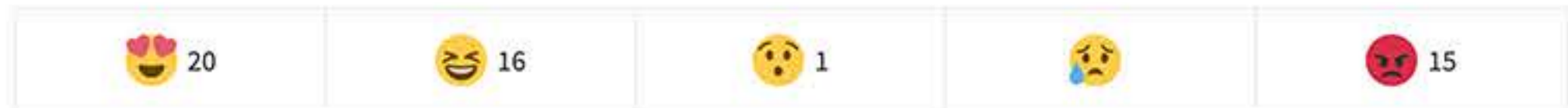
"The working sleeves, the plain shirt without a pattern, it's a signifier and it makes him very easy to find in a crowded political field," Rothman said. "It gives him a consistency. ... It's sort of an added edge when that brand consistency is almost so unintentionally plain, it makes it memorable."

Rothman said she would make minor changes based on the demographic Buttigieg is looking to attract. For instance, to appeal more to millennials, he might pair that white shirt with pants made of a "tech-savvy" wrinkle-free material, perhaps a jean/dress pant hybrid.

"What he's wearing right now is a suit without a jacket," she said. "I think there's some tweaking to open up the audience."

For its part, the Buttigieg campaign staff doesn't discuss clothing with him each day, Smith said.

"Some days he wears sweaters, some days he wears suit jackets. A lot of it just depends on the context," she said. "When you're out there campaigning every day, really long hours, sometimes it's easier just to have a uniform so you don't even have to think about what you're putting on at the beginning of the day."



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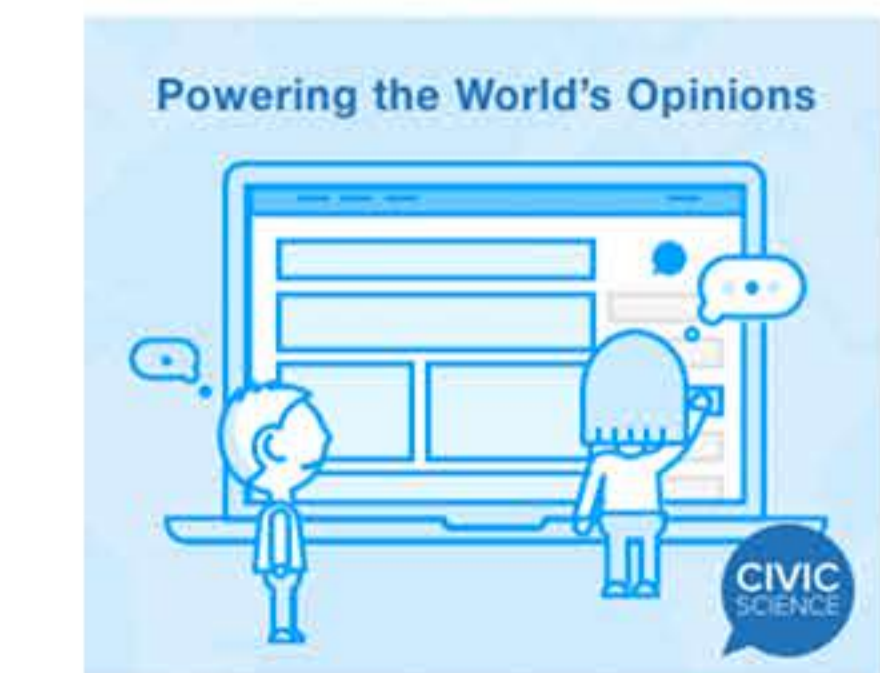
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