



## Why voting is in fashion



Vanessa Friedman

UNBUTTONED

In August, Dahna Goldstein, a 44-year-old entrepreneur and mother of one, was feeling frustrated. She was glued to the coming midterm elections, following myriad candidates and the rising tide of disrupters around the country, and she wanted to take what had become a focus of her personal life and include it in her professional life.

She wanted a message T-shirt — or something like it, anyway — that she could wear in a boardroom. She didn't want to leave her wardrobe politics to the weekends. "There was this huge disconnect between what I was feeling going on around me in the country and what was going on in my work life," Ms. Goldstein said.

She complained to her friend Alexandra Posen, an artist who is the sister of the designer Zac Posen and who was the creative director of his company until 2010.

They came up with an idea: a silk scarf, the kind you may wear with a suit jacket, etched with fine line drawings of every Democratic female political candidate on the Nov. 6 ballot. They thought other women might be interested. A new company, Resistance by Design, was born.

This election cycle, getting out the vote is not just a talking, or lobbying, point. It's a product category.

First, in November 2016, there was #Pantsuitnation and women heading to the polls in white to declare their allegiance with suffragists — and potentially the first female president.

Then, in January 2017, there was the Women's March and the pussy hat.

And now, as the midterm elections loom, there are bamboo cotton T-shirts and cashmere sweaters and leather totes with exhortations to "Vote" or "Don't Block the Box"; there are garments heralding "Power to the Polls." There is a special trunk show devoted to "Vote" tees on Moda Operandi and a page on elle.com for "Vote" merch.

Is it just a marketing moment? Carpetbagging on a hot-button issue to sell stuff? It's possible. That's the easy accusation. But there is real money, critical mass and some risk involved. And that tends to suggest something more is going on.

This isn't the sloganeering D.I.Y. uniforms of yore, the stuff of protests past (though there is some of that; see Zazzle, Etsy and CafePress). This isn't just companies urging consumers to vote or modeling civic behavior by giving employees time off to vote, like Levi Strauss and Patagonia.

This is a rejection of the premise that political fashion is for marching on the barricades on your own time. This is a proposition for a new one: clothes as an overt expression of values to be worn all the time, anywhere.

Take that to the ballot box and check it.

This is Prabal Gurung and Tory Burch and Wes Gordon of Carolina Herrera and Diane von Furstenberg and Rag & Bone putting words and symbols to cloth. This is a quilted leather tote scrawled with "Give a Damn," a collaboration by MZ Wallace (whose bags Hillary Clinton carried at the Benghazi hearings) and Lingua Franca (whose cashmere sweater scrawled with "poverty is sexist" was worn by Connie Britton to the Golden Globes in January).

This is a canvas bag for Swing Left, an organization dedicated to canvassing in swing districts, by the New York Fashion Week indie darlings Eckhaus Latta. It features line drawings and the words: "Is this what you wanted/ Lady Liberty in a foam crown/ Twirling the sign/ Everything must go/ At some point/?"

"We were really feeling emotional about the political situation, and women having a voice and the importance of getting out there to vote, because that's the way to make things change," said Monica Zwirner, a founder of MZ Wallace. "It seemed like time for a call to action, and it was almost our duty to create that possibility."

According to Valerie Steele, the curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which in 2009 staged an exhibition titled "Fashion and Politics" that looked at more than 200 years of statement-making clothes, political fashion has been around for decades. Most often, however, it was pins and generic T-shirts.

Even the paper dresses from the late

1960s that were practically wearable posters for Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey were off-label. But while activists have been wearing their issues on their sleeves for as long as slogans have existed, the involvement of the fashion industry on many levels is fairly new.

Conventional wisdom long dictated that brands should never show their party affiliations, lest they alienate a host of potential consumers. If you wanted to find out what designers believed, you had to go to their tax records and see where their donations went. Now you go to the stores. As corporate America has woken up and started speaking up, so, too, has the fashion industry. It's not just Starbucks (or Disney or Apple) anymore.

"We are living in a different time, and we can't not do something," Ms. Posen said. "And the thing you can do as a designer is uniquely leverage your skills."

Part of this has to do with social media: As visual imagery has become a means of mass communication, what you wear becomes an even more important signal of identity and values.

It's one of the reasons the MAGA hat has become shorthand for the current administration and why increasingly it makes sense to offer a physical alternative to the cap. Like, for example, the multicolored "Vote" bamboo-cotton tee designed by Mr. Gurung to represent not only the action, but also the idea of the rainbow nation. As opposed to the angry red one.

Ms. Steele traces the rise of this

more formal political fashion to the Obama administration, arguably the first truly digital White House, as well as to the related fund-raising efforts of Anna Wintour, the editor of American Vogue, via her Runway to Win.

The synergies picked up steam during the Hillary Clinton campaign, with brands such as Supreme endorsing Mrs. Clinton and offering related products. (Ms. Wintour famously wore a sequined Hillary T-shirt during New York Fashion Week in 2016.) And when Mrs. Clinton didn't win, the resulting disenchantment could be seen on multiple runways, including those of Public School and Christian Siriano.

Still, it's notable that as fashion has gotten more involved, it still claims to be relatively nonpartisan. Though it is a traditionally liberal community that has come out against President Trump and many of his initiatives, Ms. Zwirner was careful to say that voting "is a way for everyone to be involved," no matter how they vote.

Likewise, Ms. Burch, who went from writing an op-ed essay in The Wall Street Journal in 2016 urging companies to give their employees Election Day off to creating a "Vote" tee (the kind she models with a brightly striped A-line skirt in various social media posts), prefers not to categorize what she does as "political." She calls it "humanist."

That may be. But for most people buying the clothes, they function as a clarion call for change. And while in theory that change could simply mean reversing voter apathy, the clear impe-

tus is to upend the status quo. That's political, whether anyone wants to admit it or not.

And though no one really expects one person wearing a T-shirt (or scarf or bag) to get other people to alter their behavior, there is something about constantly seeing an issue that makes it percolate through the consciousness.

Especially because, unlike such efforts in the past, which often reeked of marketing as opposed to commitment, all of the profits, if not all of the proceeds, from many of these products go to nonprofits. Since the beginning of October, the MZ Wallace x Lingua Franca bag has raised more than \$100,000 for She Should Run, an organization that supports women running for office.

The sales of Ms. Burch's tee go to Yara Shahidi's Eighteen x 18, which is focused on the next generation of voters. On Moda Operandi's Vote 2018 trunk show, where a variety of the tees priced from \$50 (for an Edie Parker style with trompe l'oeil pins) to \$195 (for Brandon Maxwell's design with a red "vote" over the left breast and a cowboy hat in place of the "o"), all proceeds go to Rock the Vote. Four of the 13 styles are sold out.

"When people say 'stick to fashion,' and I get a lot of that on social media, it irritates me to no end," Ms. Burch said. "I'm going to make it the title of my next book. Because I think people will continue to weigh in on this, and that's a good thing."

Mr. Gurung agreed. "As designers, clothing is our language, our medium for communication, so for myself and many others, a statement T-shirt, sweater, sweatshirt or entire collection is our way to show the world what we stand for," he said. "To spread our message by joining with the people who can take our message from the runway or the racks to the streets."

Or the polls. On Tuesday, we will see what kind of trend this really is.

Above, Rock the Vote T-shirts by, from left, Tory Burch, Carolina Herrera and Prabal Gurung. Below, the Herwave 2018 silk wrap from Resistance by Design and the MZ Wallace x Lingua Franca tote.



GRAY & FARRAR  
THE MATCHMAKING SERVICE

Global Headquarters: 49 Charles Street ■ Mayfair ■ London ■ W1J 5EN ■ +44 (0)20 7290 9585

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