Traditions of the Senate

Dress the Part

For over 200 years, the United States Senate has held certain traditions and customs that Senators follow in order to work together in Congress. Learn about some of the Senate’s clothing traditions and try out your own dress-up ideas at home.

Words to Know

Dress Code: a set of rules for what you can wear

Seersucker: a light cloth that has a pattern of raised and flat stripes on it

What to Wear

Have you ever thought what you would wear if you had a certain job? What if your job was to represent your state as a Senator? The Senate follows a dress code for what the Senators and their staff are allowed to wear on the Senate floor. The dress code allows for variations of formal suits, jackets, dress slacks, ties, dresses and skirts, and headwear for religious purposes. While it may seem strict compared to what you wear to school, many formal businesses have a similar dress code.

Over time there have been changes to the Senate’s dress-code and other special traditions! Barbara Mikulski (D-MD, 1987-2016) was the first female Senator to wear pants on the Senate floor. There had not been many women Senators before her and all of them had worn dresses or skirts. One of Mikulski’s fellow Senator friends jokingly called it the “Pantsuit Rebellion of 1993!” Another Senator named a special day called “Seersucker Thursday” to help his colleagues face the hot and humid D.C. summer months wearing the light seersucker material. The dress code helps the Senators to look professional but they have found ways to keep their own styles within the code!

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Step 1: Think of what you wear in your everyday life. Make a list of what you wear to school, what you wear when you dress up, and what you feel most comfortable in.

Step 2: Think of what your family wears in their everyday life. Consider these questions:

- What are the similarities, or differences, of what each person wears day-to-day?
- Does anyone have to follow a dress-code for work, school, or even sports?
- How do people bring their own personal style to their outfits?

Step 3: Time to plan a “Fancy Friday”! Work with your family to come up with a “dress code” for a special dress-up day. Make sure that the dress-code is something everyone can follow. Remember—Fancy Friday can be serious or silly! Write down your dress-code ideas below or make a poster to invite members of your household to be a part of your Fancy Friday.

Share your work online. Tag us @EMKInstitute and use the hashtag #Civicsathome