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Voters want their pols clean-shaven

By Betsy Rothstein

When a politician sets off on the campaign trail, he takes his convictions, morals, occasionally his wife, and sometimes to his detriment a thicket of facial hair.

Each year on vacation, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) gives his face a rest and grows a beard. But one year while he was still in the House, his face got an extra two days' break from shaving; the lawmaker brought his hirsute holiday chops back to work.

He visited a senior center, and the occupants circulated a petition telling him to get rid of it. He hasn't worn a beard to work since.

Men in Congress have varying opinions on facial hair. Some claim they would feel naked without it, that it's part of who they are.

But political consultants, image consultants and etiquette experts say research shows that politicians who wear mustaches and beards don't poll well. Voters don't trust a candidate with facial hair. Think Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein and Genghis Khan.

On the other hand, not all hairy types are unappealing; think Abraham Lincoln, Tom Selleck, Burt Reynolds, the late Captain Kangaroo and Santa Claus.

Despite poll data and strong advice suggesting voters favor clean-shaven pols, at least 41 members of the House have whiskers of some sort.

But in the Senate, there is not a mustache or beard to be seen. Gov. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) had his grizzled beard as a senator, as did the late Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.). Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) has worn a beard on occasion, but it hasn't lasted.

"Perhaps he grew tired of razor burn," said Harkin spokesman Tom Reynolds. "Shaving every day can indeed be harsh on the skin."

The clean-shaven Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) says the marked discrepancy between the two bodies is "a work of fate." He might, he muses, grow a beard on a weeklong cattle ride -- that is, far from the marble halls of Capitol Hill.

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) says he doesn't have the option of beard. "I can't grow facial hair," he says. "I get whiskers."

In the House and the clean-shaven Senate combined, nine percent of men have mustaches or beards in their various forms, from goatee to nautical full set. There are 34 mustachioed Democrats compared with 7 Republicans. Eight Democrats have beards, including goatees, compared to only three similarly hirsute Republicans.

That means 17 percent of male Democrats have facial hair compared to just three percent of Republicans.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva's (D-Ariz.) mustache is spectacular, trailing down around his mouth and dipping into a perfect frown in brown, gray and caramel.

The congressman pretends to be self-conscious when asked about it, covers his mouth and mustache

with his hand and looks down at his feet.

But it is clear that he is proud of his mustache. He uses it as a campaign gimmick, handing out bumper stickers that depict it, with his name sandwiched between exclamation points.

"People identify you with you and then they identify you with the mustache, as weird as that may sound," Grijalva says.

The last time the second-term congressman shaved it off was when he got married, and that was only because his wife, Ramona, felt it was important for him to be clean-shaven when he said his vows.

He doesn't mind that his opponent is 6 feet 9 inches and clean-shaven. He says he's 5 feet 7 inches on a good day and is comfortable with his mustache. Advisers have told him to trim it so it doesn't hang over his lip. Others insist he lose it, or at least control it, saying, "We've got to slick you down."

To his opponent, Grijalva says, "In the words of the great Mohammad Ali, Tiiiiimberrrr. The taller they are, the harder they fall sometimes."

In his first race for Congress, Grijalva's campaign slogan was, "Not just another pretty face." The congressman says of his mustache: "It's part of my face, so I'm comfortable with it."

Fashion experts are confused on the issue. The New York Times in March reported that facial hair is making a comeback, citing the bushy beards of beautiful male models in New York Fashion Week. "Men both straight and gay, it appears, want to feel rough and manly," the story reported.

Not so says Samantha von Sperling, a Manhattan etiquette and image consultant who has advised royal families, ambassadors and politicians.

"We are in a fashion season when facial hair is not at all fashionable," says von Sperling. "The conservatives have the House. If you are trying to get a law passed, you are best to play the game and the game is to appear to be a sheep. You want to be a lion in sheep's clothing. You want to come across as clean, crisp and as polished as possible."

Nonetheless, Jonathan Grella, former spokesman for ex-Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), who is entirely bald and clean-shaven, says lawmakers can get away with having mustaches.

"My sense is that mustachioed pols have had them since the Selleck-Reynolds salad days, so their constituents are used to them. You just don't see younger people sporting 'staches these days, but we could be on the verge of a renaissance now that [U.N. Ambassador] John Bolton is making waves on a global scale."

The late Winston Churchill was once told by a woman that she did not approve of his politics or his mustache, to which he replied, "Madam, you are not likely to come in contact with either."

These days, the joke is more often on the wearer

of a mustache than by him. Last month, the Republican National Committee's official website, GOP.com, put Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean on its front page and gave him a mustache that Democrats complained was Hitleresque.

Rep. Mike Sodrel (R-Ind.) realizes that small children, including his seven granddaughters, like his short, thick, salt-and-pepper mustache more than grownups do, but he says it would be disingenuous to shave it off.

"I wrestled with the idea when I ran the first time, but I'm not very mysterious," he says. "I am what I am. I understand politics is about perception but I felt I'd be phony to shave my mustache whenever I decide to run for political office."

Experts insist mustaches make politicians seem mysterious. "People don't trust candidates with facial hair and it comes down to the simple fact that people think they are hiding," said Jeffrey Adler, a political consultant in Long Beach, Calif., who has run campaigns for 20 years.

"It's the old body-language paradigm, that they are hiding behind the facial hair. There have been numerous studies. Again and again, voters tend to the photos without facial hair. We always advise clients to lose the facial hair."

Von Sperling, the etiquette expert, concurs: "They are playing a risky game. Though they can get away with it, it doesn't lend the older men respect with younger voters who say, 'That old crony? He's not going to represent me.' The old crony with facial hair is going to appeal to other old cronies. If the old crony wants to appeal to everyone you go clean-cut."

A voter once joked with Sodrel when he was in a parade that he'd vote for him if he shaved off his mustache. But the lawmaker holds out, despite being behind in the polls and expected to lose in November.

Rep. John Salazar (D-Colo.), who, in a USA Today poll is 11 points ahead of his opponent, has had his mustache since he was 19 years old. It's a dark gray that matches the hair on his head, but it's thin and spreads over a larger portion of skin between his mouth and nose.

The only time he shaved it was in Cancun on vacation with his wife. She dared him to shave it; he went into the bathroom and came out clean. "I felt totally different," he says. "I felt naked."

Voters told him to bring the hair back. The Durango Herald asked people on the street, should Salazar bring his mustache back? The results: 17 percent yes; 17 percent no. The rest? "Who the hell is John Salazar?" Salazar recalls.

The congressman even has a mustache philosophy: "Remember one thing. The man wears the clothes, the clothes don't wear the man, and it's what's inside that counts."

Cameron Joseph contributed to this report.

