



Falling Asleep in Session: Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Following President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union Address, photos circulated throughout the media poking fun at Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who appeared to have fallen asleep during the hours-long ceremonial speech. Though this is not an anomaly, and political/legislative/judicial figures fall asleep regularly during political events, this specific event is worth discussing given its widespread media coverage. This coverage underlines the role of sleep in the public’s perception of age, legitimacy, and competency.

The most interesting aspect of this scenario is the fact that, here, Ginsburg’s sleep served as a tool of delegitimization used by figures on both sides of the political aisle. It’s rare that sleep is used as a weapon, but here it clearly was. Throughout the rest of her time on the court, this event was used as an example as to why Ginsburg was too old — too incompetent — to continue serving on the court. Even liberal figures, hoping to implement a non-conservative justice before the inauguration of Trump, used Ginsburg’s sleep as justification for encouraging her resignation.

Additionally, in response to the spreading of the image, Justice Ginsburg stated that she “wasn’t 100 percent sober,” during the speech, having had wine at dinner, which draws an interesting connection between alcohol consumption and drowsiness, given alcohol’s depressant qualities.