



Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement

Edited by
Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini
Marco Mazzoni

OPEN ACCESS

palgrave
macmillan

Fandom Democracy?

Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini • Marco Mazzoni
Editors

Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens'
Engagement

palgrave
macmillan

Editors

Donatella Campus 
Department of Letters, Philosophy,
Communication
University of Bergamo
Bergamo, Italy

Luigi Ceccarini 
Department of Economics, Society,
Politics
University of Urbino Carlo Bo
Urbino, Italy

Marco Mazzoni 
Department of Political Science
University of Perugia
Perugia, Italy



ISBN 978-3-032-25246-3 ISBN 978-3-032-25247-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25247-0>

The publication of the book is funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, funding call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104 published on 2.2.2022 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca). Project title: Fandom democracy? Celebrity and new forms of citizens’ engagement – CUP F53D2300634006.

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this book or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. This work is subject to copyright. All commercial rights are reserved by the author(s), whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed. Regarding these commercial rights a non-exclusive license has been granted to the publisher.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of the book is funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, funding call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104 published on 2.2.2022 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca). Project title: Fandom democracy? Celebrity and new forms of citizens’ engagement – CUP F53D2300634006.

The research project activities could profit of the help of an International Advisory Board, composed of Agnieszka Bejma, Christina Holtz-Bacha, Oscar G. Luengo, Philippe J. Maarek, Cornel Sandvoss, and Emilia Zankina. We are deeply indebted with all of them for their support and advice. Some of them participated also to the final conference of the project held in Bergamo on 23 and 24 September 2025. We are grateful to all the speakers and participants for their contributions.

Moreover, we would like to thank Ambra Finotello at Palgrave Macmillan, who believed in the book project and worked with us, for her invaluable assistance.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni	
1.1	<i>Political Fans: A Still Unexplored Phenomenon</i>	1
1.2	<i>Research Design and Methodology</i>	4
1.3	<i>The Outline of the Book</i>	7
	<i>References</i>	12
2	Theoretical Foundations of Political Fandom	15
	Donatella Campus, Alberta Giorgi, and Giovanni Daniele Starita	
2.1	<i>Leaders as fan Objects</i>	15
2.2	<i>The Fandom of Political Leaders</i>	17
2.3	<i>Practices of Political Fandom</i>	22
2.4	<i>Political Fandom: Further Issues for Debate</i>	27
	<i>References</i>	30
3	Identifying Political Fans	35
	Giovanni Barbieri, Fabio Bordignon, and Donatella Campus	
3.1	<i>Introduction</i>	35
3.2	<i>Identifying Fans: Baseline Typology</i>	38
3.3	<i>Refining the Typology: Consumption, Production and Sense of Community</i>	43

3.4	<i>The Fan Profile</i>	51
3.5	<i>Conclusions</i>	53
	<i>References</i>	55
4	Fans Will Be Fans? Comparing Fandoms in the Political and Star Systems	57
	Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini, and Giacomo Salvarani	
4.1	<i>The Celebrity–Fan Relationship Across Different Domains</i>	57
4.2	<i>Operationalisation and Preliminary Descriptive Analysis</i>	59
4.3	<i>Matching the Political and Star Fandoms</i>	62
4.4	<i>Comparative Description of Leader vs. Star Fandoms</i>	64
4.5	<i>Comparing Fandom Profiles</i>	70
4.6	<i>Conclusions</i>	77
	<i>References</i>	79
5	Mapping Political Fandom: Male (Not Only Young) and Right-Leaning	81
	Luigi Ceccarini, Rosanna De Rosa, Alberta Giorgi, and Giacomo Salvarani	
5.1	<i>Introduction</i>	81
5.2	<i>Gender Disparities in Political Fandom</i>	84
5.3	<i>An Age Gap in Political Fandom?</i>	87
5.4	<i>The Praxis of Political Fandom: Consumption and Production</i>	88
5.5	<i>The Nexus Between Political Fandom and Political Activism</i>	92
5.6	<i>To What Extent Do Gender and Age Influence Political Fandom?</i>	98
5.7	<i>Conclusions</i>	100
	<i>References</i>	102
6	Political Fandom and Anti-fandom on Instagram During the 2024 European Parliament Election Campaign	105
	Giovanni Barbieri and Sara Consonni	
6.1	<i>Introduction</i>	105
6.2	<i>Data and Method</i>	108
6.3	<i>The Dimensions of Fandom and Anti-fandom</i>	110

6.4	<i>Factors Underlying Fandom and Anti-fandom</i>	115
6.5	<i>Conclusions</i>	121
	<i>Bibliography</i>	123
7	From Fans Practising Politics to Politicians Practising Fandom: <i>Fandomesque</i> Political Communication in Italy	127
	Marco Mazzoni and Giovanni Daniele Starita	
7.1	<i>Introduction</i>	127
7.2	<i>Celebrity, Fan Culture, and Television's Mediating Role</i>	130
7.3	<i>Performing Celebrity in the Social Media Age</i>	131
7.4	<i>Mimicking the Vernacular: Political Actors and the Aesthetics of Relatability</i>	133
7.5	<i>Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia: A Nationalist Leader for a Localised Party</i>	135
7.6	<i>Methods for Multimodal Analysis</i>	136
7.7	<i>Frequency Analysis and Comparison Between Political Actors and Other Types of Publishers</i>	138
7.8	<i>Disentangling Fandomesque Performances: A Multimodal Visual Analysis</i>	140
7.9	<i>Discussion</i>	144
7.10	<i>Conclusions</i>	147
	<i>Bibliography</i>	149
8	Conclusions	155
	Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni	
8.1	<i>Introduction</i>	155
8.2	<i>Sociodemographic and 'Geopolitical' Profiles</i>	156
8.3	<i>Profiling Ideology and Involvement</i>	158
8.4	<i>Comparing Political and Celebrity Fandoms</i>	159
8.5	<i>The Practices of Political Fandom</i>	160
8.6	<i>The Other Face of Fandom: Anti-fandom</i>	161
8.7	<i>The Fandomesque</i>	163
8.8	<i>An Agenda for Future Research</i>	165
	<i>References</i>	168
	Appendix	171

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Giovanni Barbieri is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Perugia.

Fabio Bordinon is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

Donatella Campus is Professor of Political Science at the University of Bergamo.

Luigi Ceccarini is Professor of Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

Sara Consonni is a PhD student at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

Rosanna De Rosa is Associate professor at the University of Naples, Federico II.

Alberta Giorgi is Associate Professor of Sociology of Communication and Cultural Processes at the University of Bergamo.

Marco Mazzoni is Professor of Sociology of Communication and Cultural Processes at the University of Perugia.

Giacomo Salvarani is a Research fellow in Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

Giovanni Daniele Starita is a Postdoctoral researcher at Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence.

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 3.1	Baseline fandom typology. (<i>Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)</i>)	41
Fig. 3.2	Consumption and production indices within leader fandom. (<i>Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)</i>)	47
Fig. 4.1	Offline consumption index across leader and star fans. Percentages exhibited. (<i>Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases</i>)	68
Fig. 4.2	Propensity towards a community across leader and star fandoms at each level of a 0–10 scale. Percentages exhibited. (<i>Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases</i>)	69
Fig. 4.3	Coefficient plot logit regression models (political fandom vs. star fandom). (<i>Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases</i>)	74
Fig. 5.1	Political and star fandom, moderate and strong, by gender (seven European countries; %). (<i>Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)</i>)	85
Fig. 5.2	Political fandom, proportion of moderate and strong fans, by gender and country (%). (<i>Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)</i>)	86
Fig. 5.3	Proportion of political and star fandom, by age (%). (<i>Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)</i>)	87
Fig. 5.4	Proportion of political fandom, by gender and age (%). (<i>Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)</i>)	89
Fig. 5.5	Proportion of political fandom scoring ‘high’ on the production index, by gender and age (%). (<i>Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)</i>)	92

Fig. 5.6	Self-placement on the ideological continuum of sociodemographic groups. Comparison among strong political fans, political fans, and the overall population (average value, scale: 0 = left, 10 = right). (<i>Source</i> : Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))	94
Fig. 5.7	Panel A: Political fandom and non-fandom; Panel B: Political fandom by gender, based on political participation actions undertaken in the year before the interview (%). (<i>Source</i> : Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))	95
Fig. 5.8	Political fandom by age, based on political participation actions undertaken in the year before the interview (%). (<i>Source</i> : Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))	96
Fig. 6.1	Fandom and anti-fandom emotions	112
Fig. 6.2	Temporal trend of posts	116
Fig. 7.1	An example of a fandomesque post focusing on the personal dimension	140
Fig. 7.2	An example of a fandomesque post focusing on the political dimension	142
Fig. 7.3	An example of a fandomesque post focusing on the community of Meloni's supporters	144

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Motivations for being a fan (%). For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure?	42
Table 3.2	Political fandom typology: indicators of offline/online consumption, online production, affectivity consumption and sense of community	45
Table 3.3	Motivation for following accounts/pages dedicated to the leader. Why do you follow these social accounts or pages (among those who follow other social media accounts or pages dedicated to their favourite leader or political figure)?	49
Table 3.4	The profiles of fans of political leaders	52
Table 4.1	Cross-national percentages of political and star fans. Strong fans percentages between parentheses	62
Table 4.2	The overlap of leader and star fandom (%)	63
Table 4.3	Reasons to like the leader vs. the star between leader and star fandom for two parallel but different sets of response options	64
Table 4.4	Fandom consumption across leader and star fandoms. Percentages exhibited	66
Table 4.5	Logit regression model (DV: Political leader fandom)	71
Table 4.6	Logit regression model (DV: Star fandom)	72
Table 5.1	Political fandom and proportion of strong fans, by age and country (%)	84
Table 5.2	Production and consumption indices (high + moderate) by gender and age group (column %)	90
Table 5.3	The determinants of political fandom	99
Table 6.1	Fandom, anti-fandom, and their components	111
Table 6.2	Dimensions of emotions	115

Table 6.3	Binary logistic regression model (Dependent variables: fandom)	117
Table 7.1	Distribution of the type of publishers on #GiorgiaMeloni	138
Table 7.2	Attitude expressed towards the leader on #GiorgiaMeloni	139
Table 7.3	Representation of the leader on #GiorgiaMeloni	142
Table A1	Sample size by country	172
Table A2	Active fan-pages (22/05/2023–22/05/2024)	186
Table A3	Fan-pages for each leader as of 22/05/24	186
Table A4	Codebook used for the entire dataset, including the categories employed and their definitions	188



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni

1.1 POLITICAL FANS: A STILL UNEXPLORED PHENOMENON

This book originates from a provocative question: Are contemporary democracies transforming into ‘fan-democracies’, a term introduced by Van Zoonen (2004)? As political identities become more fluid and less ideological, could political belongings and participation increasingly rest on forms of fandom? The decline in party membership and the weakening of partisan loyalties have challenged traditional pathways to the formation of political identities. This book explores fandom as an alternative way of experiencing politics: as an attachment to a political actor (a politician or a leader) and, simultaneously, as a kind of belonging to a community or group.

D. Campus (✉)

Department of Letters, Philosophy, Communication, University of Bergamo,
Bergamo, Italy

e-mail: donatella.campus@unibg.it

L. Ceccarini

Department of Economics, Society, Politics, University of Urbino Carlo Bo,
Urbino, Italy

M. Mazzoni

Department of Political Science, University of Perugia, Perugia, Italy

© The Author(s) 2026

D. Campus et al. (eds.), *Fandom Democracy?*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25247-0_1

The association between politics and the worlds of entertainment and popular culture arises from the observation that political leaders are increasingly represented as celebrities. Contemporary strategies of leaders' image construction and management involve extensive practices of self-exposure through interviews, autobiographies, memoirs, and appearances on entertainment TV, practices not dissimilar to the self-promotion strategies of film, television, or music stars. This phenomenon has been amplified by the advent of social media, which provide a particularly suitable arena for diverse forms of performance, ranging from personal disclosure to the sharing of thoughts and emotions with the public. The integration of media arenas within a hybrid public space (Chadwick, 2013) enables politicians to pursue coherent strategies of authenticity and proximity.

The growing resemblance between politicians and entertainment celebrities has been widely analysed, particularly with regard to who political celebrities are, how they capitalise on celebrity status, and how they are covered by the media (see Chap. 2 for a review of the literature). Less explored, however, is how citizens respond to leaders' celebrity strategies in the digital media era. Similarly, much remains to be understood about the broader impact of celebrity and popular culture on public debate. The primary aim of this book is therefore to contribute to this line of research by examining how citizens respond to political actors who perform celebrity roles. In short, whereas existing research has largely focused on the *supply* side—how celebrity is constructed, who political celebrities are, and how they communicate—this book addresses the *demand* side. In doing so, it seeks to expand knowledge of citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics in its various forms.

Numerous studies have analysed the performative styles of contemporary leaders, distinguishing among different interpretations of the celebrity role—from 'cool' superstars such as Barack Obama, to tycoon celebrities such as Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump, to trendy 'everyday celebrities' (Wood et al., 2016), who emphasise ordinariness, such as Giorgia Meloni (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021). However, far less is known about their fandoms, that is, the individuals who sustain and reinforce their celebrity status. The literature lacks a definitive classification of political fans. Consequently, the extent to which they differ from traditional supporters requires further investigation, and the motivations underlying fan-like support for politicians remain insufficiently understood.

Before outlining the research design and methods, several issues central to this book should be highlighted. First, the book seeks to offer an

innovative contribution that expands understanding of the interplay between political communication and entertainment. Following a line of research initiated by scholars such as Street (2004), Van Zoonen (2005), and Dahlgren (2009), we argue that this dimension should not be overlooked, as it has the potential to reshape public debate about how citizens relate to and bond with politicians. The convergence of popular culture and politics—sometimes referred to as ‘pop politics’ (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009)—engages emotional dynamics in consequential ways. Some outcomes may be evaluated positively, as these practices may increase inclusiveness, particularly among groups traditionally less involved in politics, such as young people. Several studies suggest that civic engagement may emerge from participation in online fandom communities in fields such as cinema or sport, a form of ‘fan-based citizenship’ (Hinck, 2019). Fans may also be mobilised to support political causes, as illustrated by initiatives such as the Harry Potter Alliance (Jenkins, 2015). Pioneering studies (Sandvoss 2016; Dean 2017) postulate the emergence of communities of political fans.

At the same time, potential negative consequences must also be considered. In particular, forms of anti-fandom—communities united by opposition to political actors—may contribute to polarisation and extremism. More investigation is therefore needed into the types of social activities generated by fans of political celebrities and whether such engagement can be understood as a form of political identity and as part of the broader phenomenon of digital citizenship. The work presented in this book seeks to move research in this direction.

Second, we argue that pop culture, combined with the digital revolution, promotes new modes of political followership that reshape the nature of political engagement itself. Celebrity culture tends to elicit emotionally driven identification, resulting in the production of political content and new forms of participation. Supporting a politician in a fan-like manner may therefore function as a mechanism of community inclusion and foster new citizenship practices. Fans often perceive an interpersonal relationship with celebrities; however, as in a typical parasocial relationship (Rojek, 2015; Hills, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956), the relationship between politicians and their publics can be conceptualised as ‘asymmetrical intimacy at a distance’ (Pels, 2003). This asymmetry is nevertheless accompanied by a degree of horizontality that would have been unconceivable in traditional forms of charismatic leadership. Fans are not believers in the Weberian sense of followers devoted to charismatic authority. Celebrity leaders do

not need to be perceived as possessing exceptional qualities to inspire admiration and affect. On the contrary, they may be appreciated precisely for flaws that make them ‘normal’ rather than shrouded in a supranatural aura. As will be shown, expressions of fandom frequently involve humour and benevolent irony, evident in digital practices such as memes (Dean, 2019). In short, the convergence of politics and popular culture often renders laughter and argument, the real and the surreal, inseparable (Baym, 2007), thereby transforming the nature of political followership.

Third, although political celebrities increasingly resemble entertainment stars, important specificities remain. For this reason, the study of political fandom should be integrated with an examination of individual attitudes towards entertainment fandom more broadly. Such an approach may help determine whether a general propensity towards fandom predisposes some individuals to become fans of various types of celebrities, including political figures. Moreover, analysing differences in mechanisms of personal attraction, patterns of consumption, and fan-community dynamics represents an important area of inquiry.

1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This book is the outcome of a team project that has benefitted from funding from the European Union—NextGenerationEU, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, funding call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104, published on February 2, 2022, by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca).¹ The project, entitled *Fandom democracy? Celebrity and new forms of citizens’ engagement*, aimed to develop a theoretical framework and conduct an original empirical analysis to understand the impact of celebrity politics on the construction of consensus and the formation of political identities. As noted earlier, we focused on the *demand* side, namely citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics. We advance the claim that the digital revolution promotes new modes of experiencing political followership. More specifically, our main objectives were to conceptualise and operationalise political fandom and to understand its effects on political participation. In this regard, we sought to

¹The research team represented three Italian academic institutions (University of Bergamo, University of Perugia, and University of Urbino Carlo Bo).

address whether fan-based citizenship could become an alternative route to more traditional forms of participation.

Most previous research on political fandom has focused on specific cases and individual countries. From the outset, our ambition was to fill this gap by conducting a cross-national analysis including a diverse set of European countries. We employed a mixed-methods approach combining survey research and social media content analysis. Accordingly, the project was organised into two main parts, which also structure the book's chapters.

The first part of the research focused on citizens and their relationship with politics, with particular attention to political celebrities. To this end, we conducted a multi-country survey based on representative national samples of the voting-age population in seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK). This selection was motivated by the aim to include countries that, following Hallin and Mancini (2004), represent different patterns of inter-relationship between political and media systems. The UK represents the North Atlantic model. Germany exemplifies the North/Central model and, above all, a national context in which attention to politicians' personal lives is less pronounced than in other countries (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). Italy, France, and Spain represent the Mediterranean model. Finally, Poland and Bulgaria were included to develop an East–West comparative axis.

Data collection was conducted during the first year of the research programme, specifically in July/August 2024, using the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique (see the Note on Method in the Appendix.). Within each country, cases were selected to reproduce quotas for the main socio-demographic variables: gender, age group, level of educational attainment, and geographical area.

Representative samples comprised 1000 respondents per country. A post-stratification weighting procedure was applied to adjust the data after collection, aligning sample distributions with known population parameters and thereby reducing non-response bias while improving the precision of survey estimates. The weighting procedure also accounted for the relative population size of each country, ensuring that aggregated figures accurately represent all seven countries when total values are presented in the analyses.

This phase of the empirical research aimed to explore how the personalisation, mediatisation, and intimisation of politics shape citizens'

perspectives, blurring the boundaries between political culture and popular culture. The survey collected evidence on citizens' political involvement and their engagement with both political leaders and celebrities or influencers from different domains, alongside traditional measures used to identify political constituencies (e.g. party identification and ideological position). Following fieldwork, the data were analysed to identify different patterns and levels of engagement with political leaders and to investigate the mechanisms underlying practices of political fandom.

As noted earlier, the central aim of the study is to focus on the demand side as a key analytical dimension, exploring citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics in its various forms. A questionnaire was therefore constructed and structured into several sections: (a) standard socio-demographic variables, (b) respondents' media consumption patterns, (c) socio-political behaviours and core values, and (d) political and electoral preferences.

In line with the primary objectives of the research programme, the questionnaire further explored (e) affective engagement in political fandom and related consumption and production practices, (f) anti-fandom, and (g) entertainment celebrity fandom attitudes and practices.

The data collection phase produced the dataset used for information processing and the production of charts and tables. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted, followed by multivariate procedures using logistic regression models to address the research questions and test causal relationships. The relevant analyses are presented in Chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

The second part of the research focused on the analysis of social media content. As we examined political fandom on social media, it became clear that a multi-layered methodological framework was required to analyse phenomena occurring in volatile and fragmented digital information spaces. Preliminary research phases showed that monitoring structured communities—such as dedicated Facebook groups and Instagram accounts (e.g. *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte*)—using tools such as CrowdTangle, often captured only snapshots of political fandom, failing to provide the longitudinal perspective and structural comparability necessary for comprehensive cross-national analysis. In contemporary digital ecosystems, political fandom and anti-fandom are frequently contingent, time-based, and highly informal. Consequently, the project's methodological focus shifted from top-down managed groups and fan accounts towards the analysis of digital practices, specifically content produced around hashtags, conceptualised here as primary 'info-spaces'.

By conceptualising specific hashtags (e.g. #GiorgiaMeloni, #EmmanuelMacron, #PedroSanchez) as networked publics, the research captured a broader and more continuous flow of interactions. This approach enabled a form of digital ethnography focused on the role of affect in constituents' online practices. To investigate these dynamics, the research design adopted here follows a mixed-methods comparative approach across Italy, France, and Spain during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign (May 1 to June 10). This timeframe was selected to capture the peak of affective mobilisation preceding the vote. The sample included 12 highly visible political leaders—four per country—ensuring ideological diversity and gender balance. Briefly, the mixed-methods approach combined frequency-based analysis of collected content with theory-driven qualitative in-depth examination of selected examples of fan-like digital practices identified through those frequencies.

To achieve this objective, the information provided by CrowdTangle proved insufficient. The empirical phase therefore began with data acquisition using the licensed software 4kDownload. Once the corpus had been assembled, the research proceeded to a frequency-based content analysis, allowing the identification of recurring narrative and stylistic elements.

Operationally, the quantitative part of the study required the development of a codebook grounded in established literature on political fandom (primarily Dean's, 2017 framework). After a pilot study and the successful completion of an intercoder reliability test, trained coders analysed textual captions and visual components—such as memes and selfies—in tandem. This approach aimed to reconstruct the complex meanings encoded by both citizens and political elites, providing a comprehensive mapping of how digital fandoms contribute to contemporary affective polarisation across Europe. All relevant analyses are presented in Chaps. 6 and 7.

1.3 THE OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book opens with an overview of the main strands of existing research and of the theoretical foundations on which our analysis is grounded. Chapter 2, by Donatella Campus, Alberta Giorgi, and Giovanni Starita, begins with a discussion of political leaders as celebrities and offers a review of the principal studies in the field. As celebrity politics is closely connected to the disclosure of personal details by politicians and the media, the chapter discusses phenomena such as privatisation, emotionalisation, and the intimisation of politics. It then proceeds to illustrate the concept

of political fandom by focusing exclusively on fans of political leaders. The authors review pioneering studies on this subject and seek to distinguish among different types of leaders' fan communities, ranging from the most politicised to those most decontextualised from politics itself. Several core dimensions common to all forms of political fandom are identified: (1) entertainment, reflected in fans' playful attitudes, (2) the preponderant role of social media, and (3) affect as the constitutive fabric of fandom.

The chapter then examines how the concept of political fandom has been operationalised and which dimensions may be empirically analysed, with a view to identifying the theoretical sources that inform the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent chapters. Four dimensions are discussed: consumption, production, affect, and sense of community. Finally, based on the literature review and discussion, the chapter argues that the distinctive nature of political fandom—situated at the crossroads of political communication, political behaviour, and cultural sociology—offers a valuable vantage point from which to explore contemporary political dynamics, particularly with regard to political participation, representation, and communication. The authors conclude by highlighting issues that have only been partially explored in the literature and that warrant further attention.

As illustrated in the previous section, our research design was organised along two lines of empirical research. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present analyses based on survey data, while Chaps. 6 and 7 focus on the analysis of social media.

Chapter 3, by Giovanni Barbieri, Fabio Bordignon, and Donatella Campus, begins by discussing how political fans may be defined and how this concept can be operationalised. Drawing on insights from the existing literature and emphasising the centrality of affect as the principal driving force of fandom, the authors proposed a baseline typology of fans based on measures of closeness and emotionality, allowing a distinction between moderate and strong fans. The chapter then examines how this categorisation relates to fandom practices and to the sense of belonging to a fan community, in order to outline a broader picture of fans' experience and activities. Finally, the chapter analyses the socio-demographic and political characteristics typically associated with fans, with the aim of delineating a clearer fan profile.

In Chap. 4, Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini, and Giacomo Salvarani examine the dynamics characterising political fan communities. Specifically, they investigate the extent to which the leader–follower relationship in

politics mirrors the logic underlying the celebrity–fan bond in other spheres. By comparing political leaders’ fandoms with those surrounding entertainment celebrities through indicators of affect, as well as practices of consumption and production developed primarily within digital media environments, the chapter seeks to determine whether a ‘latent predisposition towards fandom’ transcends these distinct fields, thereby bridging the political and celebrity systems.

After formulating a set of research questions, ‘leader fandom’ and ‘star fandom’ were operationalised through comparable measures of closeness and emotionality. The research questions guiding the analyses in Chap. 4 may be summarised as follows: Do individuals who are fans of entertainment celebrities demonstrate a greater propensity to develop analogous forms of followership towards political leaders? Is it possible to identify an underlying transversal bond connecting the political and celebrity systems?

In addressing these questions—encapsulated in the chapter’s title, ‘Fans Will Be Fans’—the authors provide empirical evidence through the examination of three issues. First, they analyse the overlap between entertainment celebrity fandom and political fandom. Second, they assess the extent to which the internal dynamics of political fandom resemble those of showbusiness fandom, in terms of mechanisms of personal attraction, modes of consumption, and community logics. Third, they compare the socio-demographic profiles of the two groups.

Survey results indicate an overlap between the two communities: Individuals who form affective bonds with entertainment celebrities are also likely to develop attachments to political leaders. This pattern is consistent across all seven countries surveyed. Those involved in both domains constitute a substantial proportion of the overall fandom sub-sample. Even with regard to consumption patterns, fandoms in the two spheres display similar behaviours. Thus, these findings suggest the existence of an underlying disposition towards fan engagement, regardless of whether public figures belong to the political sphere or the entertainment industry.

However, elements of discontinuity also emerge. The key difference lies in the motivational foundations of affective engagement. Returning to the chapter’s starting point, although political fans appropriate certain practices and symbolic elements from celebrity and popular culture, they remain distinguished by their connections to political and civic implications.

Chapter 5, by Luigi Ceccarini, Rosanna De Rosa, Alberta Giorgi, and Giacomo Salvarani, examines the socio-demographic profiles of political leaders’ followers. Specifically, it addresses the influence and dynamics

associated with two key axes of social stratification: gender and age. These variables have long been recognised as significant explanatory factors in social and political behaviour and are therefore examined in detail. Women have historically demonstrated lower levels of participation in conventional political activities; accordingly, gender-based disparities in political fandom are also analysed. Furthermore, empirical research on age-related patterns indicates that younger cohorts could display greater interest in non-conventional and emerging forms of political engagement, making age another central variable in this chapter.

Examining the interaction effects of these two socio-demographic variables is essential for enhancing our understanding of the specific form of political involvement analysed in this volume. This analysis is particularly significant because it captures ongoing transformations in citizenship norms while illuminating evolving forms of political engagement and civic participation. Moreover, the data analysis explores geographical variations in political fandom across the seven countries surveyed, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of patterns emerging within diverse European societies and political systems.

To this end, a comparative perspective is adopted throughout the chapter to investigate how gender and age shape political fandom as a form of civic and political engagement, which constitutes the study's principal objective. Chapter 5 opens by asking whether gender and age influence the development of strong attachment to political leaders and participation in affective activities celebrating these figures at a distance. The main finding indicates that men are more strongly associated with this form of political involvement, a pattern that appears consistently across all countries examined. In contrast, the relationship between age and political fandom is less straightforward. When additional variables—such as identity and political-culture orientations—are considered, the picture becomes clearer, as these factors foster deeper engagement in political fandom.

Chapter 6, authored by Giovanni Barbieri and Sara Consonni, offers a nuanced exploration of the emotional topographies that shaped political engagement on Instagram during the 2024 European Parliament elections. By situating their analysis within the evolving frameworks of fandom and anti-fandom, the authors seek to understand how digital environments may be recalibrating political participation, moving it away from purely deliberative models towards a sphere increasingly characterised by affective resonance and symbolic identification. Drawing upon a

comparative study of Italy, France, and Spain, the chapter maps the ways in which both citizens and political actors navigate their identities through a diverse spectrum of emotions, ranging from admiration to indignation. Rather than asserting definitive shifts, the research invites readers to consider how the ‘affective public’ on Instagram reflects broader socio-political tensions and national polarisation. Through this lens, the authors examine the performative nature of attachment and emerging patterns of digital resistance, ultimately offering a nuanced contribution to our understanding of how emotional circulation informs contemporary democratic belonging.

Chapter 7, by Marco Mazzoni and Giovanni Daniele Starita, provides an in-depth analysis of Italian political fandom centred on the leadership of Giorgia Meloni. The chapter introduces the concept of *fandomesque* to identify fan-like content produced and disseminated online by political actors. Existing literature has offered several perspectives that help explain the mechanisms underpinning bottom-up practices through which political fandoms are constructed. In contrast, the study of how political actors themselves employ fan-like performances to build consensus has so far remained marginal within the relevant fields. Chapter 7 therefore proposes *fandomesque* as a useful concept for bridging the gap between bottom-up fan performances and top-down expressions of fan-like support for political leaders, and it provides empirical evidence supporting this initial conceptualisation. Most importantly, the chapter opens a discussion on the potential exploitation of bottom-up practices by political actors. Specifically, politicians may replicate constituents’ digital practices to blur the boundaries between organised campaigning and seemingly spontaneous expressions of support—or opposition—towards a political leader. In doing so, politicians and parties may benefit from increased relatability in their digital personae and may also reinforce the perceived legitimacy of leaders in the eyes of potential supporters.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarises and discusses a selection of findings emerging from the empirical analyses. Particular emphasis is placed on results that appear especially salient and, in some cases, provocative. We argue that the outcomes of this research not only advance knowledge of political fandom but also provide a solid foundation for further investigation. The chapter therefore concludes by outlining a research agenda that identifies key issues that, in our view, merit more detailed exploration.

REFERENCES

- Baym, G. (2007). Representation and the politics of play: Stephen Colbert's better know a district. *Political Communication*, 24(4), 359–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600701641441>
- Campus, D., & Mazzoni, M. (2021). Celebrity politics and changing performances over time. The case of Italian populist leaders. *Italian Political Science*, 16(3), 157–178.
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dean, J. (2017). Politicising fandom. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(2), 408–424.
- Dean, J. (2019). Sorted for memes and gifs: Visual media and everyday digital politics. *Political Studies Review*, 17(3), 255–266.
- Hallin, D., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hills, M. (2016). From Para-social to multisocial interaction: Theorizing material/digital fandom and celebrity. In P. D. Marshall (Ed.), *A companion to celebrity*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Hinck, A. (2019). Politics for the love of fandom: Fan-based citizenship in a digital world. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Holtz-Bacha, C., Langer, A., & Merkle, S. (2014). The personalization of politics in comparative perspective: Campaign Coverage in Germany and the United Kingdom *European Journal of Communication*. 29(2), 153–170.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and Para-social interaction; observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
- Jenkins, H. (2015). “Cultural acupuncture”: Fan activism and the Harry Potter alliance. In *Popular media cultures: Fans, audiences and paratexts* (pp. 206–229). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Mazzoleni, G., & Sfondini, A. (2009). *Politica pop*. Il Mulino.
- Pels, D. (2003). Aesthetic Representation and Political Style: Rebalancing Identity and Difference in Media Democracy, in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (a cura di), *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (pp. 41–66). London, Sage.
- Rojek, C. 2015. *Presumed intimacy: Parasocial interaction in media, society and celebrity culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sandvoss, C. (2016). Toward an understanding of political enthusiasm as media fandom: Blogging, fan productivity and affect in American politics. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 10(1), 252–296.
- Street, J. (2004). Celebrity politicians: Popular culture and political representation. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6(4), 435–452.

- Van Zoonen, L. (2004). Imagining the fan democracy. *European Journal of Communication*, 19(1), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040693>
- Van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wood, M., Corbett J. and Flinders, M. (2016) Just like Us: Everyday celebrity politicians and the pursuit of popularity in an age of anti-politics. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18(3), 581–598.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.

