



Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement

Edited by
Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini
Marco Mazzoni

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Identifying Political Fans

*Giovanni Barbieri, Fabio Bordignon,
and Donatella Campus*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the framework of our research project, the main goal is to carry out a deep exploration of the feelings, activities and practices of citizens who can be regarded as fans. Drawing on the theoretical background discussed in the previous chapter, we advance the view that the most essential feature of being a fan is to feel closeness and affection towards a fan-object. Looking at the four dimensions that have been identified as recurring most in the literature on political fandom—consumption, production, affect and sense of community—we argue that affect should be regarded either as the precondition of any consumption and production practice or as a predisposing factor for the development of a sense of community. The presence of the attachment elicited by affect allows us to distinguish real

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practices of fandom from similar behaviours based on curiosity or party alignment. In looking at, for instance, consumption practices, it should first be stressed that an effect of contemporary mediated politics has been the production of a new aesthetics of politics (Pels, 2003). As Stanyer observed (2013, p. 19), contemporary politicians are embedded in a culture that is ‘increasingly voyeuristic’, in which ‘strong pressures exist on individuals to display emotions in public’. This explains the existence of ‘a growing global secondary-media industry, which is financially dependent on exposing the private lives of public figures, including politicians’ (Stanyer, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, non-fans may also perform the act of consuming ‘intimate’ information about political leaders, whose peccadilloes and scandals are the object of great curiosity by all citizens, not only supporters. However, even uncontroversial ‘soft’ information is not less newsworthy since it appeals to a large part of the public, regardless of their political preferences. For instance, an avid reader of gossip magazines may long to know the details of the divorce of a political leader, even without intending to vote for him/her. In sum, fans are consumers, but consumers are not necessarily fans. In this regard, affective attachment may not only predispose one to forms of consumption; it also serves to distinguish fans from merely curious citizens.

As for the dimension of production, if the act of producing content about leaders seems, and probably is, more revealing of the presence of true fandom, it should be noted that the motivation to have fun is often conducive to forms of online production. Thus, if many are associated with authentic liking (or disliking, in the case of antifandom), others may be nourished simply by the desire to do something entertaining. When the ‘memefication’ of a certain leader becomes a trendy phenomenon, people with no given political orientation may also participate in its diffusion, and even in the production of memes, simply to take part in a viral phenomenon. In other words, the act of producing, if not sustained by an affective bond, cannot be taken as an incontrovertible proof of fandom. What must be kept in mind is that producers are not always potential supporters or voters. For instance, the success of the famous ‘Io sono Giorgia’ memes mentioned in Chap. 2 is likely to have enhanced the celebrification of Giorgia Meloni, but a large number of people who circulated them, including their creators, were neither fans nor supporters. In light of all this, we believe that the correct starting point for an exploration of political fandom is to focus on affect. As illustrated in the introduction, our research strategy for dealing with the topic of political fandom was to

employ a mixed-methods approach that included survey research and a study of social media content. In this and the next two chapters, our analyses are based on data obtained from a survey that we carried out in seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. As anticipated in the introduction, we selected these countries since we were interested in covering a variety of political and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) as well as different political, economic and cultural features. Data collection was conducted in the summer of 2024, and the final sample comprised 7161 respondents, with each of the seven countries having a subsample of over 1000 respondents, ranging from 1004 (in the UK) to 1049 (in Poland).¹

As discussed, we assume that all practices commonly associated with fandom—consumption, production, even a sense of community—can be conceived as expressions of an authentic celebrity–fan relationship only in the presence of affective involvement. For this reason, as will be illustrated in the next section, we directed our attention to those survey respondents who declared that they felt close to a political leader (and, in most cases, named him/her). In doing so, we were able to identify those citizens who had a clear preference for a leader and thus potentially possessed a fan-object. Feeling close to a leader is the essence of the parasocial relationship, as the illusion of closeness is the basis of what Rojek (2015) called ‘presumed intimacy’. In such relationships, emotional involvement is especially magnified in certain situations, such as when a celebrity is caught up in a scandal. Therefore, we presume that emotional involvement emerges with particular intensity in specific circumstances. When a leader is attacked or at risk, fans are ready to act in his/her defence, making the urge for protection a powerful indicator of the existence of a celebrity–fan relationship. For this reason, the analyses presented in this chapter focus on those survey respondents who, beyond closeness, exhibited several behaviours displaying a degree of emotional attachment, such as describing the leader as a friend or being offended should the leader be attacked. In short, we believe that the association of closeness with emotionality may reveal the kind of affect that may be considered the basis of fandom, the operationalisation of which is illustrated in the next section.

If affect is the driving force of political fandom, then fandom’s other dimensions should be analysed in close connection with it. For instance, if it is true that acts of consumption are not the exclusive prerogative of fans,

¹ For all other details about selection and data treatment, see the Appendix.

we may assert that true fans are strong consumers and are particularly likely to be engaged in practices of ‘affective consumption’, as will be illustrated in greater detail in Sect. 3 of this chapter. Presumably, if the citizen who is eager to consume of private details may just be curious, only a true fan wishes to interact personally with a leader or wear a t-shirt with his/her name and face. Analogously, producing supportive content that displays affect or an urge to protect is likely an indicator of fandom. Along this line, in this chapter, we have tried to build a typology of political fans by integrating indicators of the four dimensions of fandom. In Sect. 2, we draft a baseline typology of fans that allows us to distinguish between moderate and strong fans, and in Sect. 3, we examine how our categorisation of fans relates to practices of fandom and belonging in a fan community. This also allows us to outline a picture of what it means to be a fan in terms of its impact on fans’ experiences and activities. In Sect. 4, we focus on the typical socio-demographic and political characteristics of fans to delineate a proper fan profile. Finally, in Sect. 5, we summarise and discuss the main findings.

3.2 IDENTIFYING FANS: BASELINE TYPOLOGY

How do we identify political fans? Drawing on original survey data of the adult population in seven European countries, our research explores the demand side of political fandom using a multi-level approach in which the different ‘layers’ of political fandom are isolated, step-by-step, through the main dimensions identified by the literature on this topic. Given the specific emphasis of these political fandom studies on the role of political celebrities and considering the insights offered by the extensive literature on the personalisation of politics, we chose to focus on individual fan objects. That is why, in the following pages, the expressions ‘political fandom’ and ‘(political) leader fandom’ are used interchangeably.

We started with the assumption that affect should be considered the primary dimension of political fandom. To be considered a fan, an individual should in the first place develop some form of affection towards the political fan-object. This should be seen as a sort of precondition for other fan practices that correspond to other key dimensions, such as consumption, production or community orientation, which will be used to isolate the ‘inner’ layers of political fandom. Of course, an individual may (more or less continuously) consume or produce political content regarding different political ‘objects’ or even be involved in groups that form around

specific political objects, and which may be seen as (more or less stable) communities. However, unless the individual expresses at least some degree of affect, these practices alone are not enough to be considered a fan.

Our operationalisation of affect starts from the identification of its two subdimensions: closeness and emotionality. To be included in the area of fandom, an individual should be, first and foremost, able to identify a potential fan-object within a certain domain—in our case, the domain of politics. We grounded our operationalisation of citizens' closeness by mirroring standard questions on party identification. The survey question was worded as follows:

Thinking of people who have a political role in [COUNTRY] right now, is there a leader or political figure you feel close to?

This question aimed to identify the preferred political figure and potential recipient of affect. We acknowledge that similar forms of individual attachment may concern more than one political figure, especially within a specific party or political area. However, given the aims of the study and questionnaire space limitations, we decided to focus exclusively on one preferred political figure. Following the initial question on the existence of such a bond, a subsequent open-ended question invited respondents to specify the name of their preferred leader or political figure. However, even those who did not report a personal preference were retained within the area of potential fandom to avoid excluding segments of the population less willing to disclose their political orientations. For the purposes of this study, the respondent's preferred political figure will be considered a political leader regardless of her or his formal role within a political organisation.

Closeness alone is not sufficient to detect an affective bond between an individual citizen and the potential political fan-object. Thus, we introduced the dimension of emotionality, which was used to construct a typology that allowed us to distinguish between two levels of fanship. We were inspired in this by those studies assuming that fans believe they have a special relationship with their admired figures. Perceiving the admired figure as a friend is a typical dimension on parasocial scales (Dibble et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 1985). Moreover, as observed in some specific cases of political fandom (Dean, 2017), one's emotional attachment to a leader

often implies taking upon oneself any criticism or praise directed towards that leader (Lee & Moon, 2021).²

In light of all this, we asked respondents in our sample to rate, on a 0–10 scale, the extent to which they identified with two statements regarding their relationship with the political leader to whom they felt close:

I love him/her as if he/she were my friend.

When the media or other people or network users criticize him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me.

The first sentence was designed to detect the existence of a perceived intimacy at a distance with the political leader, while the second sentence aimed to measure the ‘defensive’ emotional response triggered by (mediated) forms of polarisation. The combination of the two indicators was intended to capture the positive and negative sides of the emotional reaction elicited by reference to political fan-objects. The resulting variables were combined into an additive index ranging from 0 to 10. We established level five as the threshold for inclusion in the fan area, which was further divided into moderate fans (5–7) and strong fans (8–10). In short, to be considered a fan, an individual should be able to identify a preferred political leader—even without explicitly naming her/him—and exhibit some emotions, either positive or negative, when thinking about the potential fan-object. Furthermore, our baseline typology identified two different layers of leader fandom, based on closeness and emotionality, as different nuances of affect.

Defined as such, the affective operationalisation of leader fandom involves a significant segment of European society: 24% of the voting-age population across the seven countries included in our study. Figure 3.1 reports the distribution in the overall sample and in each country. The component of strong fans—those displaying stronger affective bonds (8–10)—was 11%. The component of moderate fandom—those displaying weaker but still relevant affective bonds (5–7)—was 13%. This first estimate of the fandom area was predictably large, but did not include the additional dimensions of fandom that point to more demanding (and hence more restrictive) definitions. These dimensions will be included in

²Lee and Moon (2021) built a political fandom scale organised around three dimensions, one of which was measured through the following questions: ‘When someone criticises <politician>, it feels like a personal insult to me. I consider the success of <politician> as my success. When someone praises <politician>, it feels like a personal compliment to me. When a story in the media criticised <politician>, I would feel embarrassed. I consider <politician> to be my political companion’.

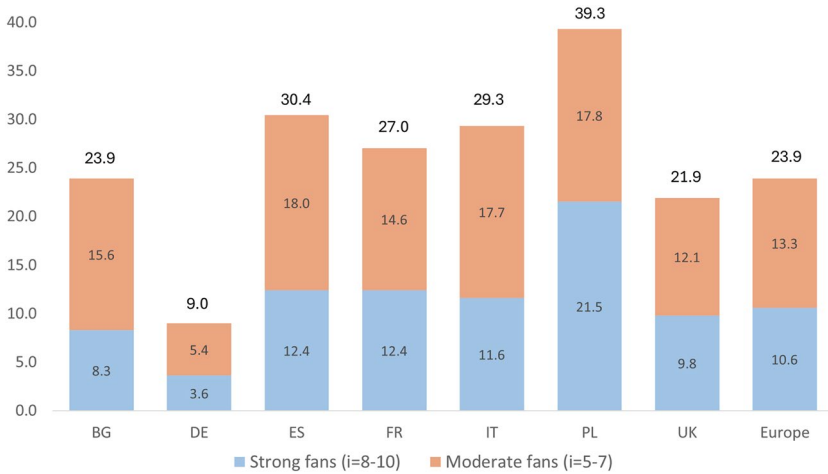


Fig. 3.1 Baseline fandom typology. (Source: *Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024* (base: 7161 cases))

the following section to further specify the ‘inner layers’ of political fandom.

The results also revealed significant variations among the seven countries, in terms of both the overall presence of fans and their internal distribution between the two levels identified by the baseline typology. Poland is characterised by both the highest overall level of fans (39%) and the highest component of strong fans (22%). However, this characterisation cannot be read as a sign of an East–West pattern, as the figures for Bulgaria are very close to the average distribution, with an overall fan prevalence of exactly 24%. Moreover, neighbouring Germany is at the other end of the distribution, with the lowest levels of both fans in general (9%) and strong fans (4%). This characterisation is consistent with the results of the study by Karvonen (2010), which identified Germany as one of the national cases exhibiting mixed negative evidence for the personalisation of politics.

Figures for the UK are only slightly below average, with 22% of fans and 10% of strong fans. Higher values appear to be specific to Southern European countries, particularly Italy and Spain, where the overall number of fans is around 30% and strong fans are 12%. In France, the segment of strong fans stands at 12%, while overall fandom is slightly lower, at 27%.

Table 3.1 Motivations for being a fan (%). For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure?

	Primary motivation		Total mentions (top 3)	
	Strong fans	Fans	Strong fans	Fans
For being competent and capable	17.7	17.7	42.7	48.1
For being a real, authentic person	17.7	15.5	41.0	39.7
For sharing his/her ideas and political vision	17.5	20.1	46.0	48.0
For understanding the problems of the people	12.8	13.8	40.0	41.7
For being an honest person	12.9	13.8	44.9	41.5
For being the only one who can save [COUNTRY]	11.7	10.7	35.1	31.6
For being likeable	6.4	5.5	23.2	19.4
No answer	3.3	2.9	–	–

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

To understand what drives the feelings of affection behind being a fan, a direct question asked respondents to report their own motivation for ‘liking’ the political leader. Each respondent could indicate their primary motivation, choosing among seven predefined options and up to two additional motivations in order of importance. Table 3.1 displays the results for the top-ranked options, as well as the overall figures, which represent the sum of the three choices. The values are reported for both fans in general and strong fans.

Predictably, the most traditional ‘political’ attributes on the list tended to emerge as the most cited by respondents, especially when we looked at overall motivations—that is, the sum of the three possible answers. Competence and ideological alignment were the main attributes that people mentioned to justify their link with an individual political figure, with 48% of fans and 43% of strong fans liking their leader ‘for being competent and capable’ and 48% and 46%, respectively, liking their leader ‘for sharing her/his ideas and political vision’. These options point to the substantive component of the leader’s profile: what leaders think and what they do (or could potentially do). Of the interviewees categorised as strong fans, 18% chose these motivations as their primary reasons for being fans. The same figure applies to authenticity, with 18% of strong fans liking their leader, first and foremost, ‘for being a real, authentic person’. Strong fans seemed to value the capacity of their leaders to present themselves without

hypocrisy, without filters and perhaps as ‘one of the people’. The relevance of this dimension is less evident when we consider fans in general (15%) and the sum of all answers, even if it should be stressed that 40–41% of fans included it in their top three reasons. In other words, leaders’ personal appeal seems to be explained by their ability to mirror the ‘real society’ rather than being perceived as part of a detached elite. In the same vein, ‘understanding the problems of the people’ was selected by about 40% of fans, with 13% of strong fans indicating it as their primary reason.

Honesty was another important (self-reported) driver of personal closeness, with more than 40% including it among their three main reasons for liking their leader and 13–14% of fans identifying it as the main attribute a leader should display. The messianic dimension of personal attraction had a lower but still significant role in people’s answers. About one-third of fans also chose their preferred leader ‘for being the only one who can save’ the country, with 11% of fans and 12% of strong fans mentioning it as the main driver of their attraction. Finally, much less frequently cited are reasons relating directly to the dimension of ‘likeability’, which was mentioned by 6% as their first reason and by 19–23% as one of their main reasons for feeling close to a political figure.

3.3 REFINING THE TYPOLOGY: CONSUMPTION, PRODUCTION AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The area of affective involvement identified in the previous section was quite large. According to our baseline typology—which centres on the criterion of affect—almost one person out of four (24%) across the seven European countries can be considered a political fan. These individuals have developed a special link with political leaders. Fans perceive themselves as being ‘together with’ the political leader, even though this connection does not imply physical proximity and is (often) mediated by technology. Despite having never met the leader in person, fans are convinced that they are engaged in a personal friendship. They feel that the leader ‘speaks’ to them and that their everyday lives ‘speak’ to the leader. Fans feel that what happens to the leader also ‘relates’ to them to some degree. They experience distress when the leader faces adversity or is the target of personal attacks. In such situations, fans feel personally targeted and reinforce their empathy towards the leader. In short, fans internalise a

sense of proximity and emotional connection: they feel they share ‘something’ with the leader on emotional grounds in their everyday lives.

If we consider the highest degree of emotionality, the area of potential fandom is reduced to less than half, with only 11% of our sample belonging to the ‘strong fan’ category. However, the inner layers of this degree of fandom can also be delineated by introducing additional dimensions suggested by established conceptualisations in fandom studies. As analysed in Chap. 2, the key dimensions suggested by the literature on these topics are consumption, production and sense of community. Table 3.2 provides a series of indicators pertaining to these dimensions, delineated as either online or offline consumption. It also introduces the additional dimension of affectivity consumption, which is intended to capture the individual propensity to ‘consume’ the leader through different practices. All of these measures are provided with a breakdown by fan category as either moderate or strong. Predictably, intensity of consumption, production and sense of community tends to increase among fans who display higher degrees of affect.

3.3.1 *Consumption*

Our indicators of offline consumption include traditional forms of engagement with the leader via in-person political events, such as rallies, demonstrations, or face-to-face encounters, as well as mediated forms of interaction through pre-digital media, such as television and the press. Political stars, like others in the celebrity world, are expected to perform for fans who attend their performances. Moreover, fans are supposed to appreciate in a special way the opportunity to meet their stars in person, exchange a few words, and, especially, take a selfie with them,³ all of which are activities that lead them to attend events in which the leader participates. In our sample, 61% of the fans had seen or heard the leader at a public event. As anticipated, this figure was higher among strong fans (71%).

Regarding mediated offline consumption, we decided not to concentrate on passive exposure to news regarding the leader and focused instead on more specific (and presumably active) attention to personal

³Selfies with politicians are supposed to be part of a strategy intended to mobilise public sentiment among voters (Abidin, 2017) and have become a new mediated political ritual (Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

Table 3.2 Political fandom typology: indicators of offline/online consumption, online production, affectivity consumption and sense of community

	<i>Moderate fans</i>	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>
Offline consumption			
Read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed (% yes)	57.5	63.1	60.0
Read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines (% yes)	37.2	53.8	44.6
Read a biography/autobiography about him/her (% yes)	37.5	51.2	43.6
Saw and/or heard him/her in person at a public event (% yes)	53.0	70.7	60.9
Online consumption			
Regarding this leader or political figure, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages (% yes)	52.2	60.3	55.8
(among those who follow the leader's social media) follow one of his/her live videos (% yes)	67.1	82.9	74.7
Follow other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure (% yes)	27.9	43.1	34.6
Online production			
(among those who follow the leader's social media) 'like' or repost his/her content (% yes)	81.3	91.9	86.4
(among those who follow the leader's social media) comment on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon) (% yes)	64.3	83.4	73.4
... reposted/retweeted memes about him/her (% yes)	34.5	47.3	40.2
... used hashtags with his/her name (% yes)	24.7	38.5	30.8
... written posts/tweets about him/her (% yes)	28.5	42.4	34.6
... created and circulated a meme, hashtag or social media page about him/her (% yes)	28.2	38.6	32.8
Affectivity consumption			
I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	69.0	89.7	78.2
I would like to take a selfie with him/her (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	51.3	83.1	65.4
I would buy merchandise with his/her name or face on it (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	31.8	69.1	48.3
Community			
I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	66.4	92.8	78.1

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

information about him/her, which points to the phenomenon of the popularisation, privatisation and celebrification of politics. Usually, interest in the private lives of public figures is taken as an indicator that they have been transformed into celebrities (Turner, 2014). Thus, we expected to find evidence of this attitude among the fans in our sample. In fact, 60% of fans had read an article or watched TV programmes discussing the leader's private life, with 45% having read articles about the leader in gossip, fashion or news magazines, and 44% having read the leader's biography or autobiography. For the latter two dimensions, which are more explicitly linked to the sphere of celebrity politics, the difference between moderate and strong fans is particularly relevant.

In general, the results confirm the well-documented relevance and persistence of the legacy media, and television in particular, in mediated forms of political involvement, which also applies to the fan-leader relationship. At the same time, evidence from case studies of political fandom for leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders suggests that these dynamics have been further accelerated by the diffusion of digital media, which favours an environment in which para-social interactions take place or are, at least, reinforced. This suggested a detailed exploration of fans' online behaviour. The survey results confirm the salience of digital channels in fans' consumption of their political leader, with 56% of respondents in our baseline typology following the leader's social media accounts or pages. In this case, the difference between moderate and strong fans was less pronounced—8 percentage points—compared to what was observed regarding other digital accounts or pages dedicated to individual political celebrities. For the latter, the figure dropped to 35%, with a 15-percentage point gap between moderate and strong fans (28% and 43% respectively). It was very common among those who followed the leaders' social media to consume live content generated by their fan-object, with 75% of fans (and 83% of strong fans) watching videos published by their leaders.

To explore their overall prevalence in fan practices, these measures of offline and online consumption were combined in two additive indices. The same indices can also be used to delimit more restrictive areas of potential fandom: the inner layers that correspond to more 'demanding' conceptualisations of fanship that combine—in this case—affection and consumption. Within the area of baseline fandom—24% of the voting-age population—those with significant levels of offline and online consumption were 39% and 47% respectively (Fig. 3.2). In relation to the overall voting-age population, these figures correspond to 9% and 11% respectively.

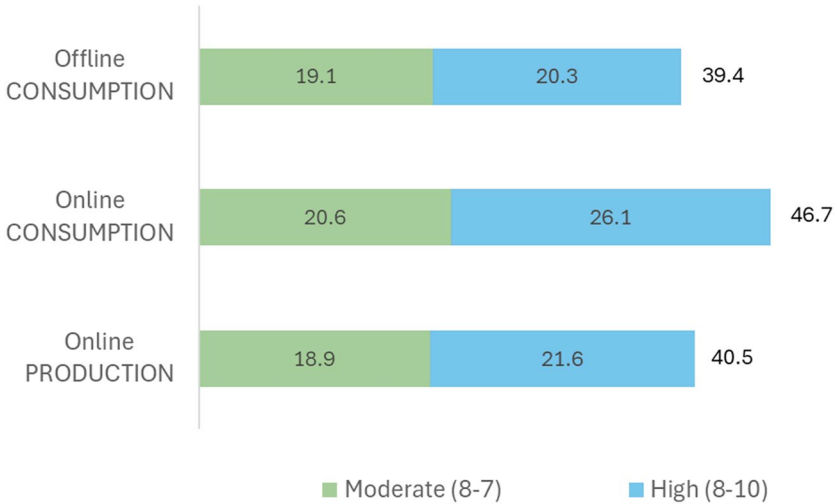


Fig. 3.2 Consumption and production indices within leader fandom. (*Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)*)

Other forms of consumption are inherently less prevalent as they imply in-person contact with the leader or the availability of products that are not necessarily distributed by the leader, their staff or the fan community. Given the inevitably wide scope of a survey of the general population, we tried to capture these additional dimensions in terms of individual propensity towards what may be termed ‘affective consumption’ (Table 3.2). This proved to be quite widespread among fans, especially among strong fans. For instance, 78% of fans and 90% of strong fans ‘would like to have a coffee or a beer with the leader’; 65% and 83%, respectively, reported a desire to take a selfie with them; and 48% and 69% would buy merchandise featuring the leader’s name or face. In other words, affect appears strongly related to affective modes of ‘consuming’ the leader, and even when fans do not have the opportunity to make their dreams come true, the desires themselves serve as a powerful indicator of the strength of their attachment.

3.3.2 *Production*

Production is another key dimension identified by fandom studies and one that is particularly related to digital media. In this environment, activation

and—at least potentially—two-way communication between citizens and political representatives take place. Online leader-oriented production encompasses a wide array of practices, from low-threshold, almost effort-less ones on the part of the fan to more ‘costly’ ones in terms of the time, expertise and financial resources required to perform them. The survey questionnaire included six questions regarding behaviours related to the dimension of production.

Liking or reposting political content published on the leaders’ accounts is perhaps the least demanding way to express emotional involvement; it is the easiest way for the fan to react to the leaders’ production, to produce and reproduce media content related to them. The literature on e-participation has long debated whether such actions should be included in the domain of political participation, with terms such as slacktivism, clicktivism or armchair activism being used to disqualify these minimal-effort forms of political engagement (Cantijoch & Gibson, 2019; Ceccarini 2021). Among the baseline fans who followed their leaders’ social media accounts, about nine out of ten—86%, and 92% for strong fans—liked or reposted, while 73%, or 83% of strong fans, had commented on one of the leader’s posts, if only with an emoticon.

These results confirm that these actions are part of the habitual online routines of fans who are active in the digital space. However, a significant segment of our baseline group of fans was also involved in other online forms of production, with 40% of fans reposting memes about the leader and 31% using hashtags with the leader’s name. Both variables confirm a close relationship between affective attachment and these forms of political consumption, the prevalence of which is more than 10 percentage points higher among strong fans compared to moderate fans. Writing an original post implies a slightly higher level of commitment; nevertheless, this form of production involved more than one-third of fans and 42% of strong fans. The same holds true for the production of other self-generated online content, such as memes, hashtags or social media pages: 33% of fans and 39% of strong fans stated that they had created and circulated such digital artefacts.

Similar to the approach we adopted for the consumption dimension, we also combined these six variables through an additive index to allow for a deeper exploration of the relationships between affection and online practices, while also identifying an additional inner layer of potential political fandom. As shown in Fig. 3.2, 41% of our baseline group had been

involved, to a significant degree, in forms of online production. This figure corresponds to 11% of the general voting age population.

3.3.3 *Community*

What is the weight of the community dimension involved in being a fan? This aspect is more difficult to detect using survey tools, which cannot delve into the internal dynamics of the groups that emerge around a political figure and are instead designed to investigate individual feelings. Some attempts to capture this dimension, however, have been made (see, for instance, Lee & Moon, 2021). Drawing on insights from previous studies, we gathered data that may shed light on how political fans deal with the ‘collective dimension’ of fandom. First, we directed our attention to fan pages devoted to leaders, which sometimes consist of the primary demonstration of fandom such as in the case of ‘Le bimbe di Conte’ (Campus et al., 2025). Fans who followed ‘other’ accounts or pages—beyond those managed by the leaders and their staff—were asked about their specific motivations for visiting such unofficial, and often fan-run, digital hubs (Table 3.3). Among the responses of this subsample, the segment of those who explicitly reported feeling ‘part of a community’ was quite limited: only 5% cited it as their primary motivation, and 35% included it among their top two motivations. An additional, larger component reported that they ‘enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the

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)?

	<i>Primary motivation</i>		<i>Total mentions (top 2)</i>	
	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>
I find it entertaining	33.8	35.9	44.4	45.4
I am interested in following pages about the leader	40.2	41.1	61.4	59.2
I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the leader	19.7	18.1	60.1	60.5
I feel part of a community	6.3	4.9	34.1	34.9

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

leader': 18% cited this as their primary motivation, a figure that rose to 61% when combining the two top responses. Other dimensions seemed to prevail in the respondents' self-reported motivations, at least when the fans who followed such pages were asked to select the top-ranked one, with 41% citing their general interest in following such pages about the leader and 36% saying it was because they 'find it entertaining'. The entertainment dimension, such as the use of memes, which also surfaced in the indicators analysed earlier in this section, emerged as another significant component of the fan experience. However, when considering the top two responses, entertainment and interest rose to 45% and 59% respectively. These figures underscore the broad relevance of interacting with fellow supporters of the leader, which garnered 61% of the combined responses.

It is worth noting that despite providing some insights into the importance of the community dimension, the data presented so far pertained to a relatively small proportion of our baseline fans—the 35% who reported following unofficial accounts or pages about the leader. To comprehensively measure the relevance of this dimension across the entire fan base, another specific question was addressed to all respondents, with 78% of fans, assigning a score from 6 to 10 on a 0–10 scale, indicating identification with the sentence, 'I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do'. Although this result does not provide evidence for an actual community, interacting with peers with congruent views and shared feelings about the leader seems to emerge as a central component of being a fan. In other words, the parasocial fan–leader (affective) interaction seems to extend, to a certain extent, to the fan–fan relationship. Other methodological approaches, especially qualitative and ethnographic ones, may provide more robust evidence regarding the existence of communities of fans defined by deep(er) emotional bonds, marked by in-group versus out-group attitudes, shared practices and dense networks of horizontal interactions. However, our data revealed, at the very least, a strong propensity in this direction among our baseline group of fans, thus highlighting a close nexus with the sphere of affection. The fact that 93% of those identified as strong fans shared a community-oriented mindset significantly reinforces this interpretation.

3.4 THE FAN PROFILE

In this section, we seek to identify the socio-demographic and political characteristics that are typical of fans to delineate a proper fan profile. In this regard, it should be emphasised that this aspect of our object of study, as far as we are aware, has not been thoroughly explored in the literature, which has instead devoted greater attention to followers' or fans' physical and psychological characteristics or their social capital (see, for instance, Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). In pursuing this goal, we cross-tabulated the fan-/non-fan-dependent variable with five additional variables: three socio-demographic variables—gender, age and level of education—and two socio-political variables—interest in politics and self-placement on the left–right axis. Of these, the socio-political variables most strongly discriminated between fans and non-fans, since the percentages recorded in some of their categories diverged in ways particularly marked from their column marginals (Table 3.4). In this respect, it may first be observed that those who express a strong interest in politics—and to a much lesser extent, also those who show some interest in politics—display levels of closeness and affectivity towards a leader that can qualify them as fans. This is hardly surprising, as individuals who are interested in political matters are almost certainly more inclined to acquire and consume political information and are therefore more equipped to assess the qualities and competences, as well as the limits and shortcomings, of the various leaders, and thus to decide to which leader to grant their trust, thereby becoming fans.

The second socio-political variable, self-placement on the left–right axis, also had a strong impact on the likelihood of being characterised as a fan. Indeed, it is above all those at the extremes of the political continuum—particularly on the right—who show a pronounced tendency to exhibit fan-like attitudes and behaviours. This does not appear particularly surprising, as individuals holding more radical political positions usually express stronger attachment either to the political community to which they feel they belong or to the leaders who embody that community. Furthermore, with regard to the strong propensity of those who define themselves as 'right-wing' to be fans, it is perhaps superfluous to recall the importance traditionally attributed to the 'leader' by adherents to movements and parties belonging to this political galaxy. In recent years, moreover, it is especially within the so-called radical right populist parties that, thanks to the development and diffusion of digital technologies, a

Table 3.4 The profiles of fans of political leaders

	<i>Not a fan</i>	<i>Moderate fan</i>	<i>Strong fan</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Fan (moderate + strong)</i>
Gender					
Male	71.2	15.5	13.3	100.0	28.8
Female	80.7	11.3	8.1	100.0	19.4
Age class					
18–29	73.5	15.4	11.0	100.0	26.4
30–44	75.6	12.7	11.7	100.0	24.4
45–54	77.6	13.5	8.9	100.0	22.4
55–65	79.6	11.0	9.4	100.0	20.4
65+	74.4	14.1	11.5	100.0	25.6
Education level					
Low	76.3	13.4	10.3	100.0	23.7
Middle	75.5	13.8	10.6	100.0	24.4
High	76.3	12.8	10.9	100.0	23.7
Interest in politics					
Very interested	65.4	15.6	19.0	100.0	34.6
Somewhat interested	73.7	16.6	9.8	100.0	26.4
Not very interested	84.8	9.4	5.8	100.0	15.2
Not at all interested	96.9	2.1	1.1	100.0	3.2
Left–right self-placement					
Left	70.6	19.2	10.2	100.0	29.4
Centre-left	78.8	15.8	5.4	100.0	21.2
Centre	85.3	9.4	5.3	100.0	14.7
Centre-right	74.1	16.9	9.0	100.0	25.9
Right	53.8	17.0	29.2	100.0	46.2
External	95.1	3.1	1.9	100.0	5.0
ALL	76.0	13.3	10.6	100.0	23.9

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

disintermediation of politics has occurred, together with a particularly strong attempt to establish a direct relationship between the leader and his or her ‘people’ (Mudde, 2007, 2017).

Turning now to the socio-demographic variables, men are more likely than women to fit the fan profile, perhaps due to their greater involvement in political issues. With regard to the age variable, a slight propensity can be observed among both the youngest and oldest respondents to display typical fan attitudes and behaviours, thus entrusting themselves to leaders in whom they place their hopes: the former probably because

they have not yet developed a fully structured political identity, the latter perhaps because they attribute to the leader a potential role in improving a state of affairs that, in their eyes, may have appeared unchanged for far too long.

Finally, it is interesting to note that education level did not exert any influence on the likelihood of becoming a political leader fan. One might have mistakenly assumed that individuals with lower levels of education would be more attracted to the ‘personalistic’ aspects of politics and less to its substantive content. However, as observed in other fandom domains, such as sport, cinema and music, the phenomenon of fandom cuts across and bypasses educational boundaries; fans can be found across the entire spectrum, from those with the highest qualifications to those with none.

As noted above, the analyses made it possible to distinguish moderate fans from those who may be considered strong fans. It is therefore interesting to examine whether differences exist between these two levels of fandom with respect to the variables discussed above.

As shown in Table 3.4, it is once again the socio-political variables that most clearly distinguish the two fan types. Indeed, the highest proportion of strong fans (19%) was observed among those who are very interested in politics, whereas the largest share of moderate fans (17%) was observed among those who are only somewhat interested in politics. Moreover, the highest proportion of strong fans (29%) was recorded among individuals who position themselves on the right of the political spectrum, while among those who self-placed on the left, moderate fans (19%) clearly outnumber strong fans (10%).

By contrast, socio-demographic variables reveal little differentiation, except for a slightly higher proportion of moderate fans among younger respondents.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS

The main argument of this chapter is that affect is the driving force of political fandom and is thus the main dimension on which a definition of a political fan should be built. To answer the theoretical and empirical questions as to how to operationalise and measure fans’ affective attachment to their leaders, we focused on feelings of closeness and on the emotional components of affect. This allowed us to show that a not insignificant number of citizens can be regarded as fans and that this group can be

divided into two categories depending on their degree of attachment: moderate and strong fans.

Following the insights from existing studies, we analysed what it means to be a fan in terms of practices of consumption and production and a sense of community. As for the former, we expected that strong fans would be more involved than moderate fans. Overall, our findings confirmed this expectation: Strong fans scored higher in all offline and online activities. When the difference between the two groups is smaller—such as in the similar numbers of those in both groups who followed their leaders’ official accounts—this pertains to accessible activities that require minimal effort. In short, there may exist a relationship between intensity of affect and level of concrete engagement. As for sense of community, our method was not the most functional with which to investigate this dimension; nonetheless, our results suggest some explorative reflections concerning the importance of interacting with like-minded people and, especially, sharing the same feelings.

Finally, profiling fans, especially stressing the difference between the two categories of moderate and strong fans, has provided extremely interesting and possibly provocative insights into the phenomenon of political fandom. First, since famous cases of political fandom are often associated with young and digitally active people, we must stress that strong fans are not the youngest, as the elderly are slightly predominant in that category. This does not mean that political fandom is not for the young but stresses that, in contrast to some interpretations, it is not *only* for the young.

Second, the ‘funny’ side of fandom and its evident component of entertainment could misleadingly be associated with a frivolous way of approaching politics. If it may be true that these aspects have the potential to help politicians connect with previously detached people, our findings disconfirm such a widespread prejudice and rather show that strong fans are interested in politics. This suggests that, as argued by Dean (2019), many politically engaged citizens may also experience politics through non-traditional cultures, such as memes and other forms of visual media culture.

Overall, the evidence presented and discussed in this chapter confirms the importance of taking political fandom seriously. Our data show that this phenomenon concerns, albeit with different nuances and gradations, a not negligible segment of the population and pertains to the affective and emotional dimensions of contemporary politics.

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