



Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement

Edited by
Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini
Marco Mazzoni

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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

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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



Theoretical Foundations of Political Fandom

*Donatella Campus, Alberta Giorgi,
and Giovanni Daniele Starita*

2.1 LEADERS AS FAN OBJECTS

The focus of this book is on the relationship between a leader and a group of followers whose behaviour and practices resemble those of a fan community. Scholars such as Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) and John Street (2020) have argued that political supporters and fans share important similarities. It is worth stressing that this line of reasoning—that

In the framework of the research project, the article “*Politici celebrities e cittadini fans: come si crea coinvolgimento politico attraverso il fandom*”, published by D. Campus and A. Giorgi on Quaderni di Teoria Sociale, 1–2, 2025, pp.8–30, contains a preliminary work that has been subsequently developed and expanded in this chapter.

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supporters may be regarded as fans—presupposes that leaders are approached by their followers as if they were celebrities. For this reason, this chapter begins by illustrating the phenomenon of political celebrities, a concept that has been extensively investigated in recent years and that provides a compelling starting point for our analysis of political fandom.

The interaction between politics and popular culture (Marshall, 2014; Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009; Van Zoonen, 2005) has contributed to the transformation of politicians into celebrities (Street, 2004; t'Hart & Tindall, 2009; Wheeler, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). In his groundbreaking contribution, Street (2004) argued that a form of celebrity politics emerges when politicians use formats and codes of popular culture to promote their careers.¹ t'Hart and Tindall (2009, p. 258) distinguish between politicians who enter politics with visibility and popularity acquired in non-political fields and office-holders 'whose public behaviour, purposeful association with celebrities, and/or private life' project them 'into the celebrity sphere'. Both types may establish a clear celebrity–fan relationship with the public; the difference lies in the fact that politicians of the first type already possess a pre-existing fandom on which they can capitalise to develop a political fandom.

Mass media interest in private and intimate life fuels the transformation of politicians into celebrities. Celebrity is therefore closely connected to processes such as privatisation, emotionalisation, and intimisation (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Stanyer, 2013; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), through which either media or politicians publicly discuss personal details. Both actors have an interest in circulating more 'personal' information within the mediated public sphere. On the one hand, the media seek to attract audiences' attention and curiosity, constantly searching for new protagonists and emotionally engaging stories. Politicians' private lives and personal experiences often meet these demands.

On the other hand, politicians strive to appear authentic. This occurs when a leader offers a convincing performance of being 'true to the inner self'—a real and coherent individual (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018)—without discrepancies between the private and public spheres (Luebke, 2021). To this end, displaying emotions, disclosing passions, and sharing past experience can be highly effective. In particular, political leaders may pursue three goals: (1) appearing as human beings exposed to joy and sufferings like everyone else; (2) presenting themselves as 'men and women of the people' in contrast to élites and the establishment; and (3) softening an

¹ Street (2004) identified another form of celebrity politics, where famous people belonging to the star system support political issues or candidates.

image perceived as too harsh or detached. This latter strategy is often adopted by politicians with radical views or outspoken styles who wish to project a more friendly and approachable image (Bentivegna et al., 2024, pp. 218–221).

Overall, media coverage of political leaders increasingly resembles that devoted to entertainment celebrities. Personal information circulates not only through soft news outlets, such as entertainment TV, tabloids, and photo-news magazines, but also through mainstream media, which have increasingly incorporated *soft* content (Esser, 1999; Johansson, 2020). The ‘celebrification’ of political leaders is further amplified by social media. Politicians use their social media accounts to foster an ‘intimate’ relationship with followers, sharing pictures of family members, holidays, and even meals (Starita & Trillò, 2022). In so doing, they seek to elicit and sustain a ‘parasocial relationship’ (Rojek, 2015), becoming ‘intimate strangers’ (Stanyer, 2007, p. 72): figures whom followers have never met in person but perceive as acquaintances or even friends, to whom they feel affection and emotional attachment.

Beyond leaders’ direct control, the online circulation of diverse visual materials—such as memes and videos—by other actors further enhances leaders’ celebrity status. Even a single meme can have remarkable effects. This was the case with Giorgia Meloni’s video ‘Io sono Giorgia’, a dance music remix of excerpts from one of her speeches. Initially created to mock her conservative views on traditional families, the video went viral and generated widespread online engagement. Meloni herself, then leader of an opposition party, publicly stated that she appreciated it, likely recognising its role in making her a ‘popular’ figure (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021, p. 166). In the next section, we focus on the celebrity–fan relationship from the perspective of supporters, examining how they establish connections with popular culture that sustain the construction and functioning of political celebrities.

2.2 THE FANDOM OF POLITICAL LEADERS

The literature on leaders’ fan communities reveals the existence of different attitudes among political fans (Campus et al., 2025; Dean, 2017; Dean & Andrews, 2021; Sandvoss, 2012, 2013). One prominent example is the fanbase of Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK Labour Party between 2015 and 2020. Corbyn, a middle-aged politician with a long career and clear left-wing positions, became a heroic figure for groups of leftist activists who supported his rise to the party leadership and backed him

enthusiastically thereafter. According to Cornel Sandvoss,² Corbyn's large following comprised a variety of fan groups, ranging from traditional Labour supporters to the passionate activists of the Momentum organisation. Between these groups were individuals who felt a personal bond with Corbyn himself (rather than with the Labour party) and were integrated into both offline and online networks. Together, these groups gave rise to what became known as *Corbynmania*, a phenomenon characterised by practices such as chanting at Corbyn's rallies, participating in speeches, and, above all, producing and circulating memes featuring the leader online (Dean, 2017, 2019). Fans also displayed strong affection for Corbyn and acted protectively towards him, responding to attacks against him in a highly personal manner, as exemplified by the hashtag *#whatyoudotojeremyyoudotome*.³

A similar intertwining of enthusiasm for a leader's personality and ideological commitment can be observed in the case of Bernie Sanders, the US senator who ran in the Democratic presidential primaries in 2016 and 2020. Sanders' candidacy was supported by what amounted to a social movement, which Penny (2017, p. 4) described as follows:

...a crowdsourced connective action that flows from the grassroots participatory culture of online fancommunities. At the same time as the formal Sanders campaign organization built "official" applications that transformed supporters into a tightly coordinated social media distribution network for its policy-oriented messaging, it also benefited from looser digital networks that created and circulated pro-Sanders content that was more informal and culturally oriented in nature.

As Chadwick and Stromer-Gally (2016, p. 288) observed, Sanders' campaign can be seen as 'a reassertion of the power of the grassroots-netroots'.

Like Corbyn, Sanders also became a celebrity. His strong social media presence contributed to his popularity, but he was also familiar with more traditional forms of celebrity politics. He appeared on magazine covers,

² <https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2019/section-8-personality-politics-and-popular-culture/last-fan-standing-jeremy-corbyn-supporters-in-the-2019-general-election/>

³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/corbyn-mania-cult-of-personality-or-political-movement/>

was featured on Saturday Night Live,⁴ and received endorsements from actors such as Mark Ruffalo, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins, as well as from rappers and artists in the hip-hop world (Tomaszewsky, 2017). Sanders' appeal was linked not only to his character but also to his left-wing positions and openly anti-establishment stance. While some observers argued that support for Sanders stemmed more from sympathy for his outsider status⁵ than from his ideological commitment, other studies suggest that his supporters valued his progressive agenda: 'By and large, Sanders' voters believed in his unique and moral vision' (Altamura & Oliver, 2022). Accordingly, Sanders' political fandom can be described as 'politicised', following Dean's definition (2017), as representative claims were constitutive of the fan community for many supporters.

Not all instances of political fandom display the same ideological depth. Dean (2017) examined fans of Ed Miliband, leader of the UK Labour Party in the early 2010s. The so-called *Milifandom* was a fan community created online that emerged through hashtags such as #CoolEdMiliband and #Milifandom. Dean (2017, p. 416) described Milifandom as follows:

As it gained a degree of momentum and visibility, Milifandom became a genuine, if perhaps rather transient and often tongue-in-cheek, community of girls and young women who, for the most part, genuinely admired Miliband and were committed to contesting unfavourable media portrayals of him.

In the absence of broader representative claims, the political content of Milifandom largely consisted of defending Miliband against media attacks (Dean, 2017, p. 420).

Even more decontextualised from the political context is the case of @lebibedigiuseppeconte, an Instagram fan page dedicated to Giuseppe Conte during his tenure as Italian prime minister during the COVID-19 pandemic (Campus et al., 2025). The posts on the page expressed playful admiration for Conte's persona, portraying him as a confident and handsome Prince Charming. Especially during the early stages of the pandemic, the content was entirely apolitical. Over time, as Conte resigned from government and became leader of the Five Star Movement, the page

⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL2dGTDQXVo>

⁵Achen C., & Bartels L. (2016, May 23). Do Sanders supporters favor his policies? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/23/opinion/campaign-stops/do-sanders-supporters-favor-his-policies.html>

began to represent him more explicitly as a political figure and in more realistic terms. Nevertheless, the tone and language of the posts remained strongly influenced by the conventions of romance fiction.

In sum, the fandom of political leaders can take different forms, characterised by varying degrees of political engagement. Nevertheless, several common features are worth highlighting. The first is the entertaining dimension: political fans appear to be motivated by playfulness and a desire to have fun. A typical manifestation of this is the creation and circulation of memes. Among Labour supporters, memes featuring Jeremy Corbyn ‘were circulated ad infinitum’ (Dean, 2019). Corbyn was compared to well-known fictional characters—most notably Star Wars’ Obi Wan Kenobi—and was often teased in an affectionate manner. Similarly, Sanders became the fan object of a *Bernie Sanders Meme Page* on Facebook, which was initially created as a space for sharing pop culture content about Sanders and soon evolved into ‘a fully crowdsourced online political community’ with over 400,000 members (Penney, 2017, p. 15). The dimension of fun and entertainment is also central in the cases of Miliband and Conte. Dean (2017, 418) commented on the former:

...there was more than a hint of playfulness and irony. It thus existed in an ambiguous liminal space between genuine political and personal support for Miliband, and at times ironic replication of the textual and visual tropes of more traditional fandom. [...] Milifandom thus combined sincere political commitment with, perhaps, a certain kind of transgressive pleasure.

In the case of @lebimbedigiuseppeconte, the core theme of the Instagram account was ‘the adoring support’, with Conte celebrated primarily as a person, with his appearance and character at the centre of attention. At the same time, fans displayed a strong sense of humour, referring to Conte as ‘Daddy’ and joking about their affectionate feelings towards him (Campus et al., 2025).

As Dean (2019) noted, these practices may appear frivolous, but they actively foster the formation of political communities. The circulation of playful content can generate enjoyment while also facilitating connections among politically engaged citizens. Moreover, the entertaining dimension may attract less engaged individuals who approach political fandom out of curiosity. Importantly, entertainment presupposes a horizontal relationship between leaders and their fans. Irreverent content such as memes, often characterised by irony or mockery, would have been unlikely—or

even inappropriate—within traditional relationships between charismatic leaders and loyal followers. In contemporary politics, however, such content contributes positively to leaders' public images (Penny, 2017, p. 15). In particular, this horizontality enhances leaders' perceived accessibility, resonating with populist narratives that emphasise the closeness and similarity between leaders and 'the people'.

A second feature common to most forms of political fandom is the central role of social media in the formation of fan communities. While fan activities are not exclusively online—a point to which we return later—digitally mediated politics constitutes a defining characteristic of contemporary fandom. As Penny (2017) argued, it is useful to distinguish two forms of 'cool politics'. The first, introduced by Street (2003) in his seminal work, is top-down and occurs when leaders construct their celebrity status through traditional means, primarily through legacy media. This includes appearances on talk shows and entertainment programmes, features on magazine covers, and associations with celebrity endorsers. Social media may also play a role in this form of self-promotion, although it is typically carefully managed by politicians and their communication teams. The second form, in contrast, is bottom-up 'cool politics'. Penny (2017, p. 16) described this as follows:

In such cases, supporters take it upon themselves to build these culturally grounded associations by emulating patterns of effusive hero worship (and ridicule of perceived enemies) that are familiar in online fan communities. The result of this crowdsourced cultural production and circulation is a form of participatory campaign promotion that positions supporters not as message conduits, but rather as autonomous 'grassroots intermediaries' for political brands (Jenkins et al., 2013).

In this sense, contemporary political fandom is inseparable from the grassroots participatory culture of online fan communities.

A third defining feature of political fandom is the central role of affect in shaping the relationship between fans and leaders (Dean & Andrews, 2021). The concept of affect originated in psychology to describe emotionally driven mechanisms that shape individuals' responses to others and to events in the external world (Tomkins, 2014). More recently, affect and emotionality have been widely employed to explain contemporary political phenomena (e.g. Gervais, 2015; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Van Zoonen, 2004). In line with this literature, and given the focus of this

book on political fandoms, we adopt an analytical perspective that conceptualises an ‘affective turn’ in politics, particularly evident in phenomena that blur online and offline boundaries. Moreover, the analytical lens of affect has become an essential part of the study of contemporary political phenomena, as relevant discourses are increasingly unfolding in online spaces. Given the affective nature of social media interactions, it is unsurprising that digital political phenomena have been conceptualised as ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2015), in which expressions of sentiment are central to mobilisation, aggregation, and organisation of consensus in online spaces. Political fandoms, as well as anti-fandoms—communities formed around shared disdain for specific political figures—have thus flourished alongside the widespread adoption of social media in Western democracies.

In essence, constituents become fans when their engagement with a politician is better understood through the lens of their emotional attachment rather than ideological alignment. In other words, political supporters turn into fans when they develop parasocial relationships with leaders, relating to political figures as if they were their friends or adversaries. Once such personalised bond emerges, the conditions for political fandom are established. Conversely, affect may also take negative forms when emotional responses are driven by intense disapproval that extends beyond ideological disagreement into personal hostility (Sandvoss, 2019). As Ahmed (2014) argued, negative sentiment can be a powerful force, fostering collective expressions of disapproval or even hatred among individuals who might otherwise remain politically disengaged. In such cases, constituents become anti-fan, defining their relationship with political leaders through adversity and antagonism.

2.3 PRACTICES OF POLITICAL FANDOM

Having introduced the phenomenon of political fandom and discussed several illustrated cases, this section examines fan practices in greater detail. What, concretely, do fans do that allows them to be identified as such? And what distinguishes fans from more conventional political followers?

The literature on fandom, and political fandom in particular, consistently revolves around several key dimensions: consumption, production, affect, and a sense of community (Dean, 2017; Sandvoss, 2013). Some scholars also consider the degree of support for political ideas and values embodied by the leader. For instance, in defining ‘politicised fandom’,

Dean (2017) introduced the concept of *contestation*, whereby political fandom is rooted in a series of representative claims that are generated and consolidated through interactions between leaders and their fan communities. As noted before, however, this dimension does not apply to all forms of fandom, which may exist independently of broader political agendas or movement-like structures.

Consumption is widely regarded as a foundational dimension of fandom, with pleasure derived from consumption constituting a central element of the fan experience (Heinich, 2011; Turner, 2014). Individuals can scarcely be considered fans if they are not engaged in at least some of the following activities: collecting information about the fan object, including details of private life, hobbies, and interests; attending performances or events, either in person (e.g. political rallies or speeches) or through media mediation (e.g. TV appearances, press interviews, and live-streamed events). All media platforms are implicated in leaders' efforts to maintain supporter engagement. While entertainment and gossip media are key sources of information about politicians' private lives, mainstream media increasingly contribute to the circulation of soft news. Crucially, a substantial portion of fan consumption now takes place via social media. As discussed earlier, contemporary celebrity politicians often invest significant time and effort in cultivating and sustaining their online presence. Consequently, following a leader's social media accounts provides supporters with a steady stream of personal information, much of it voluntarily disclosed by the leaders themselves.

Social media also facilitate distinctive fan experiences, such as direct and personalised interactions with the fan object. Leaders may respond to posts, exchange comments, or engage in humorous exchanges with supporters. In more extreme cases, leaders may incorporate themselves directly into promotional activities, offering themselves as a prize. For instance, the leader of the Italian party Lega, Matteo Salvini, launched a contest titled 'Vinci Salvini' ('Win Salvini'), in which participants could enter by liking a post on his Facebook page, with the prize being a personal conversation with him (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021, p. 165).

Not all followers of politicians' social media accounts should be categorised as fans, particularly when engagement is sporadic or minimal. Fans are more readily identifiable among those who actively respond to leaders' posts. Nevertheless, there may also be 'engaged listeners', described by Barnes (2022) as assiduous followers who rarely express opinions publicly, but nonetheless develop a fan identity. More broadly, consumption alone

is insufficient to define fandom. Citizens may consume political content out of curiosity or incidental interest. Therefore, it can be argued that while all fans are consumers, other behaviours are better indicators of fandom. This observation directs attention to the second key dimension: production.

For some scholars, consumption and production should not be analysed as separate dimensions but rather as points along a continuum (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). In that vein, Sandvoss (2013) and Dean (2017) conceptualised fandom as occupying the space between consumption and production. Regardless of the theoretical approach adopted, it is incontrovertible that the production of content and materials represents a stronger indicator of engagement than consumption alone and thus provides a useful criterion for distinguishing fans from weak supporters or merely curious citizens. Production can take many forms. For instance, fans may create and sell merchandise, organise gatherings or themed events, or write books and graphic novels featuring political leaders as protagonists. According to Sandvoss (2013, p. 261), fans may engage in textual productivity, understood as the creation of new texts related to the fan object, such as fan fiction, music remixes, or fanzines. In particular, the most dedicated fans are ‘those to whom the focal point of their fandom shifts to their own textual activity and who are frequent bloggers themselves’ (ibidem). One notable form of textual production is political fan fiction, hosted on platforms such as Wattpad or Archive of Our Own, in which political leaders are portrayed as central characters in a variety of narrative genres, including romance.

While textual production is significant, the predominance of visual digital media in contemporary political engagement means that a substantial proportion of fan production takes the form of memes and GIFs, which convey feelings and opinions (Dean, 2019). As Dean (2019, p. 6) observed, ‘Their playful character renders them profoundly affective insofar as they can be sources of pleasure, fun, connection or anger and irritation, depending on the context’.

A more advanced form of online production is the creation of fan pages dedicated to celebrating political leaders. Supportive fan pages for political leaders can take various forms. Some adopt a more formal tone and primarily express political support. Others, such as @lebimbedigiuseppeconte, focus on celebrating the leader as a person, with particular attention to physical appearance and character; still others function mainly as spaces for sharing memes, cartoons, and ironic jokes for entertainment

purposes.⁶ This is the case of the previously mentioned ‘Bernie Sanders Meme Page’ on Facebook (Penney, 2017).

The third dimension of fandom addressed in literature is affect, whose centrality is widely acknowledged (Dean, 2017; Sandvoss, 2013). As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between fans and their favoured—or antagonised—leader is fundamentally affective. An emotional bond with a leader appears to be a necessary condition for fandom. In cases of supportive fandom, this bond is typically accompanied by genuine care for the leader, such that attacks or criticism directed at them are experienced personally by fans. A clear illustration of this dynamic is the #whatyoudotojeremyoudotome movement, whose uncritical support for the then Labour leader became an object of debate and mockery.⁷ Conversely, anti-fans perceive their antagonistic expressions as necessary actions to expose what they regard as legitimate reasons for opposing a particular leader. Hatred or hostility is often articulated in relation to support for an alternative political figure, as demonstrated by the fierce attacks launched by some Sanders supporters against Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren during the 2020 primary elections.⁸ As Lee and Moon (2021, p. 3) noted, ‘Fans are likely to show closer *identification* with the figures, which leads to higher emotional engagement, even taking evaluation, criticism, or praise directed toward the politician as their own’. More broadly, fans can act as valuable ‘influencers’, particularly in times of crisis, by mobilising support and disseminating enthusiasm that contributes to surrounding the leader with a positive aura (Lee & Moon, 2021, p. 8).

It is through this analytical lens of affectively charged, parasocial relationships with political celebrities that we can better understand emerging forms of political contention across many Western democracies. One example is the increasing polarisation of political debate between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Within this context, supporters of figures such as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have taken it upon themselves to promote her agenda, effectively becoming virtual volunteers in her campaigning efforts (Rodriguez & Goretti,

⁶The distinction between different fan pages is based on the classification in Campus et al. (2025).

⁷See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/12/labour-leadership-nec-jeremy-corbyn>

⁸See, respectively, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bernie-sanders-apologizes-negative-joe-biden-op-ed/story?id=68422468> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/07/politics/bernie-sanders-social-media-attacks-invs>

2022). On the opposing side, the Tea Party (Sandvoss, 2019) and MAGA (Miller, 2020) constitute emblematic cases of political mobilisation with a strong anti-fandom component. These movements repurpose opposition to progressive policies into active support for reactionary positions. In a similar manner to Sanders' supporters' attacks on his opponents, detractors of a political leader may be driven to support rival figures. That dynamic is also evident in the Australian context, where Julia Gillard's speech went viral among constituents seeking to express dissent towards the conservative politicians she criticised (Macnaughtan & Trott, 2024).

The fourth dimension of political fandom is the sense of community, which refers to practices that presuppose the existence of interconnected networks of individuals. Fans not only share beliefs and behaviours related to the fan object but also have opportunities to interact with one another. As Lee and Moon (2021, p. 10) suggested, fan community engagement can be operationalised through practices such as discussing the politician with other fans, meeting in person or online, and participating in fan-oriented events.

Political fan communities can vary considerably in structure and organisation. Some are sustained by formal organisation, such as Momentum, a grass-roots and networked movement of supporters. In other cases, the community context is more fluid and loosely articulated. Sanders' supporters, for example, formed 'unofficial grassroots networks that circulated more informal and culturally oriented appeals' (Penny, 2017, p. 1), 'each playing a unique role in supplementing the formal campaign's top-down digital outreach with the culturally grounded appeal of amateur user-generated content like humorous memes and viral videos' (p. 4). In some cases, it is more difficult to speak of a clearly defined community. For instance, the followers of @lebimbedigiuseppeconte may initially appear to be united primarily by a shared desire for entertainment during a challenging period, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Campus et al. (2025, p. 159) observed, 'some clues indicate that they perceive themselves as a sort of community. As an example, when a reportage on TV talked about the success of the fanpage, "Le Bimbe" made proud comments by showing a sense of belonging'. At least for the most enthusiastic followers, Le Bimbe thus became a group whose collective identity was shaped by a shared devotion to Conte.

Communities also vary in duration, ranging from loosely connected networks of fans who mobilise temporarily around specific events—such as the use of a shared hashtag or the circulation of a meme—to more stable

and enduring groups characterised by sustained interaction and identification. The amount of time invested in fandom practices of production and consumption influences not only the perceived sense of community but also the nature of the practices themselves. Long-term participation in fan communities entails the internalisation of group norms, including those that define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fandom practices, as well as the rules governing emotional expression. Fan communities actively monitor and police these feeling and expression rules, and not all forms of expression are treated as legitimate, and not all modes of expressing them are deemed appropriate.

In conclusion, analysing political fandom requires, first, identifying who qualifies as a fan and, second, distinguishing different types of fans on the basis of their practices. These practices can be further differentiated according to whether they occur online or offline—although the former now clearly predominate—and according to varying levels of involvement. Finally, the study of political fandom must account for the reciprocal dynamics between fans and the fan object, as fans, particularly when organised into fanbases, can play a distinctly active and influential role in contemporary politics.

2.4 POLITICAL FANDOM: FURTHER ISSUES FOR DEBATE

In this chapter, we have analysed how existing studies have sought to conceptualise political fandom and to identify its key traits and dimensions. What clearly emerges is that political fandom—a phenomenon located at the intersection of political communication, political behaviour, and cultural sociology—offers a valuable vantage point from which to explore contemporary political dynamics, particularly in relation to political participation, representation, and communication.

Political fandom practices encompass both online and offline forms of consumption and production—such as attending rallies or producing and circulating memes—that are charged with emotion. These emotions, whether negative or positive (including resentment, hostility, contempt, enthusiasm, affection, and hope) drive forms of political expression that manifest as fandom or anti-fandom. Such forms of engagement expand the repertoire of political participation by incorporating expressive, identity-based, and affective modalities of consumption and production. Non-political or apolitical fandom practices, enabled (and amplified) by digital media logics, can foster modes of political participation that

combine playfulness and ironic detachment with emotional attachment. In this context, rather than issue- or ideologically grounded engagement, it is often the sense of belonging and the social validation provided by the fan community that play a decisive role in political fandom.

Before moving on to the description of our research design and the presentation of our findings in the following chapters, it is worth highlighting several issues that have only been partially addressed in the existing literature and therefore warrant further scholarly attention.

First, emerging empirical evidence raises questions about the interconnections between political fandom and celebrity politics. This relationship calls for an intersectional approach that examines the uneven likelihood of politicians eliciting fan-like performances. For example, one might ask whether female politicians are more frequently the targets of anti-fandom than fandom or whether left-wing or younger politicians are more likely to cultivate dedicated fanbases. Additional questions concern the relational dimension of political fandom. Political fandom both presupposes and amplifies the logic of celebrity politics: by becoming fan objects, political leaders are transformed into symbolic figures whose meaning is co-constructed by supporters through practices of re-presentation, satire, and cultural remixing. This co-construction introduces a novel form of audience interaction in political representation. Fans amplify favourable narratives, defend the leader, and at times enforce loyalty norms. Conversely, anti-fans weaponise antagonism to attack political figures, thereby contributing to an adversarial communicative climate that fuels polarisation.

Although fan-leader relationships may appear to be characterised by playful or tongue-in-cheek adoration, political fans may nonetheless exert influence over the objects of their fandom. The same fan communities that can amplify a politician's visibility and popularity can also rapidly coordinate punitive actions, including forms of cancellation. Consequently, politicians who attract fanbases may be subject to new, audience-driven types of accountability. While these dynamics are unlikely to overturn formal power relations, they complicate the traditional mechanisms of political representation and thus provide a valuable perspective from which to analyse contemporary transformations of democratic politics. In this respect, the relationship between political fandom and electoral behaviour constitutes an additional area of inquiry. Political fandom does not necessarily translate into electoral support for the admired politician or party, making it important to examine the factors that mediate or inhibit this conversion.

Second, the theoretical interconnections between political fandom and populism merit particular attention. Political fandom exemplifies both dis-intermediation and a form of re-mediation, as illustrated by the community dimension of fandom, which also performs normative and regulatory functions with respect to fan behaviour. Immediacy, parasocial relationships, affect, and the performative role of emotions are key features shared by both fandom and populism. This raises the question of whether political fandom is more likely to emerge in populist contexts. As Juárez Miro (2021) demonstrated in a study of the Spanish populist far right, the analytical tools of fandom studies can help elucidate the community-building processes of populist supporters. Since belonging to a community is central to populist movements, fan studies offer a useful lens through which to interpret populist claims to represent the ‘true people’. Moreover, the circulation of ideas through networked digital infrastructures—a defining feature of fan practices—closely resembles the organisational dynamics of many populist movements. As Juárez Miro (2021, p. 64) argued, ‘research on populism using a fan studies lens could help clarify the social affective facet of populist bases, the importance of belonging in a community, and its influence on their social identity’.

Finally, it is important to note that fan participation varies substantially over time. It may be highly volatile and short-lived, or it may take the form of long-term, sustained practices. In this sense, the study of political fandom addresses a dimension that is particularly relevant to contemporary politics: the continuity of support for a political project or appreciation for a political leader. Since the 1990s, numerous studies have documented a steady decline in political party membership and highlighted the link between distrust in politics and electoral volatility. At the same time, more recent analyses suggest that strong political polarisation and the presence of stable populist parties may reduce volatility. On the one hand, populist parties benefit from protest voting; on the other, they inspire forms of loyalty that promote electoral stability. From this perspective, it would be valuable to explore the relationship between volatility in political participation—expressed through voting, fandom, and other forms of engagement—and emotional attachment to political actors or projects.

Overall, the analysis of political fandom foregrounds novel forms and mechanisms of political engagement that reshape the relationship between citizens and political representatives. By focusing on affective attachments, playful participatory practices, and culturally and digitally mediated modes

of mobilisation, research on political fandom illuminates processes of political loyalty formation and collective identity construction that operate alongside, and sometimes in tension with, traditional institutional politics. In doing so, the study of political fandom sheds light on the intertwining of digital and political grammars—most notably the central role of irony in political fandom—and provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how democratic participation is being reconfigured in contemporary digital environments.

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