



Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement

Edited by
Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini
Marco Mazzoni

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

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

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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

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Conclusions

Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this book was to develop a theoretical framework and carry out an original empirical analysis to understand political fandom. We claimed that celebrity politics has been transforming political followership in a form of fandom. Therefore, we focused on the ‘demand’ side—that is, citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics. As most research in this field deals with only one or two countries at a time, our ambition was to carry out an analysis of political fandom across several countries to draw some general conclusions and obtain a broader perspective about this phenomenon.

The methodological approach we adopted—a mixed-method research design including surveys and analysis of social media content—provided us with rich and valuable information and data. The huge amount of

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material that we gathered and only partially used in this book's analyses—which we consider just the first step of our research endeavour—allowed us to provide a broad picture and highlight some aspects that are, in our opinion, worthy of being emphasised and discussed.

The following sections are organised around topics that we have identified as the most crucial on the basis of our empirical findings. The sections focus on fan profiles according to the results from survey data and social media content; the relationship between fandom and ideology; the differences and similarities between political and celebrity fandoms; the practices of fandom; anti-fandom—a phenomenon that appears more diffuse than we expected and which has consequences for the general polarisation of the political sphere; and the *fandomesque*, which suggests that the dividing line between demand and supply is blurred. The final section of this chapter discusses a future research agenda.

8.2 SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC AND 'GEOPOLITICAL' PROFILES

8.2.1 *Results from Seven Countries Survey*

The sociodemographic profile of political fandom, drawn from opinion polls conducted in the seven European countries examined in the study, has specific characteristics that distinguish it, at least in part, from star fandom. Moreover, as evidenced by the analyses, political fandom involves approximately 24% of the population across the countries examined.

With respect to sociodemographic variables, men were more likely than women to engage in political fandom. The survey showed that 29% of the men interviewed can be classified as fans, with 13% falling into the 'strong fan' category, while the corresponding figures for women are 19% and 8%, respectively. It is also worth emphasising that political fandom is not only a youth-oriented phenomenon. While there was indeed a propensity towards fandom among the youngest cohort (18–29 years), a similarly robust interest emerged among the elderly (those aged over 64). Of particular note was the slight predominance of older individuals among strong fans; these fans also exhibit a markedly greater affinity for the community dimension relative to their younger counterparts—a finding that complicates the prevailing assumption that political fandom is an exclusively digital-era phenomenon associated with younger generations.

An interesting finding concerns educational level, which does not influence the probability of becoming a fan of a political leader. The

phenomenon cuts across all education levels. Therefore, it is not solely the less educated who are attracted to aspects related to the personalisation of politics.

Among the countries surveyed, Poland boasted the highest percentage of political fans, at 39%. It also has the largest component of strong fans (21%). At the opposite extreme lies Germany, with only 9% total fans and a mere 4% strong fans. These data are consistent with previous studies describing the German system as less predisposed to the personalisation of politics, of which political fandom is a noteworthy expression.

Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain showed above-average results. In these democracies the phenomenon is deeply embedded among citizens, with a fan percentage of 30% and a share of strong fans equal to 12%. France and the United Kingdom occupy an intermediate position. France had a total fandom level of 27% (and a 12% ‘strong’ component); the United Kingdom was positioned slightly below the overall sample average (24%), with 22% total fans and 10% strong fans. Bulgaria aligned precisely with the sample average, with 24% of fans.

The comparative analysis across countries suggests that the ‘geopolitics’ of fandom does not conform to any identifiable pattern. No sharp distinctions emerge between Eastern and Western Europe, nor between Northern European and Mediterranean countries. The differences observed amongst the countries examined therefore reflect, above all, national political cultures and historical traditions, which shape affective attachments to individual leaders rather than any macro-regional characteristics.

8.2.2 *Political Fans on Instagram: A Three-Country Comparison—France, Italy and Spain*

In order to go deeper into the considerations outlined above, it is valuable to broaden our perspective by taking into account the second line of the Fandom Democracy research project, which, as previously mentioned, is based on social media analysis—namely Instagram. This provides significant information on the phenomenon under study in three countries: France, Italy and Spain. The analysis of content posted on Instagram enabled the profiling of the supporters/fans behind the posts into distinct categories: ordinary users, political actors, political commentators and those who run fan accounts (the residual category of ‘other’ was also considered in the previous chapters, where the data was presented and discussed).

The citizens who were the most active in producing, publishing or circulating posts containing affective content were ordinary users (519 posts, 37.9% of the total). However, individual and collective political actors (party members and candidates, local political committees, etc.) were also remarkably numerous (418 posts; 30.6%) and appeared to adopt fan-like attitudes primarily to enhance visibility and mobilise support for their preferred leaders. The number of posts published by political commentary and fan accounts was reasonably significant (304 posts, 22.2%).

This profiling revealed notable differences across the three countries—Italy, France and Spain—considered in the analysis of social media content. In France and Spain, ordinary users played a pivotal role in expressing support for or criticism of a leader (42.5% and 62.1%, respectively), whereas other actors assumed a comparatively marginal role. In Italy, by contrast, there was a predominance of posts published by political actors (38.0%), although those produced by ordinary users (29.9%) and political commentary and fan accounts (27.3%) were also significant.

Thus, whereas in France and Spain Instagram constitutes an important media platform for ordinary users wishing to articulate their symbolic proximity to or distance from a political leader, in Italy it functions primarily as an instrument employed by political actors to both cultivate trust in and demonstrate loyalty to a leader and to engage in a form of political propaganda (see, in this regard, the considerations around the ‘fandomesque’ explored later in this chapter).

8.3 PROFILING IDEOLOGY AND INVOLVEMENT

Returning to the public opinion analyses conducted on survey data, including multivariate models, our research identified the variables that best define political fans based on their political orientation. Political interest and ideological orientation provide important evidence for this. Fans exhibit significantly higher levels of interest in politics than do non-fans. Those who are ‘very interested’ in politics are strongly over-represented among high-intensity fans. While this may appear self-evident, if not trivial, these findings confirm that fandom represents a mode of participation widely practised by citizens who have a political culture marked by a competent and engaged approach to politics.

Moreover, political fandom is enriched by another element: it is more common among those at the extremes of the political ideology spectrum,

and there is a marked prevalence of it among those identifying as right-wing. Analyses conducted across different chapters show that those self-identifying as right-wing have a highly pronounced tendency to manifest political fan attitudes and behaviour. This is a bond that intersects the affective dimension—albeit ‘at a distance’—and which is characterised by direct, disintermediated communication between the people and a (strong) political leader. Such dynamics are typical of populist movements, particularly (though not exclusively) those on the radical right.

8.4 COMPARING POLITICAL AND CELEBRITY FANDOMS

The survey also allowed for a comparison between political and celebrity fandom, highlighting the similarities and differences between them. Regarding common features, education level carries entirely marginal weight within both political followership and star fandom. Furthermore, like celebrity fans, political fans desire intimate parasocial interactions, such as having coffee or taking selfies with their reference figures. Additionally, a significant proportion of fans are willing to purchase merchandise featuring the leader’s face, a practice typical of the star-fandom mechanism.

In terms of differences, one must mention not only the issue of age, which is directly linked to the ‘frivolous’ and youthful aspect typical of the celebrity fandom, but also the nature of the engagement itself. Political fandom is an activity involving politically engaged and mature individuals open to innovative languages (such as memes) and non-traditional modes of experiencing their political passion; these people may be susceptible to polarisation when it comes to their political stances. It should also be noted that for political fans, the ability of a politician to share a vision and display competence, honesty and, above all, responsiveness—the capacity to address citizens’ demands—is paramount.

The figure of the political leader is thus evaluated not for traits of ‘extraordinariness’, as occurs with star fandom in the showbiz realm, but for their concreteness. However, it should also be noted that a marked overlap between the two types of fandoms—14% (celebrity fandom accounts for 18% and political fandom accounts for 10%)—suggests the complexity of this research subject and the interweaving of the issues under study, which extends far beyond the necessary analytical distinction drawn between the two types of fandom.

8.5 THE PRACTICES OF POLITICAL FANDOM

Throughout the book we have stressed the importance of consumption and production as key components of political fandom. In a nutshell, this elucidates the real-life activities fans undertake in practising their fandom. Our findings confirm that those defined as fans engage heavily in both offline and online forms of consumption. Our research design, especially, aimed to focus on media outlets and formats that might reveal a degree of intimisation of politics. This produced data and analyses that confirmed our expectations by highlighting the occurrence of this type of exposure among fans. Predictably, production, since it is more time-consuming and requires more effort, appears less commonly practised than consumption. Our findings about the propensity towards some fandom experiences—like taking a selfie or having a coffee with the preferred leader—are also of interest.

Here follows a short recapitulation of the main results. Regarding offline consumption—that is, participation in political events such as rallies or face-to-face encounters, as well as forms of interaction through pre-digital media, such as television and the press—we can confirm that fans are interested in seeing their leaders in person (61% of fans in our sample saw or heard the leader at a public event) and to know details of their private life (60% of fans read an article or watched TV programmes discussing the private life of the leader; 45% read articles about the leader in gossip, fashion or news magazines; 44% read a biography or autobiography of the leader). All these activities are more prevalent among strong fans.

In order to capture not only what fans do, but also what they like to do, we introduced a measurement of their propensity for engaging in types of consumption that are not always available or accessible (we refer to this set of activities as affective consumption). The following proved to be experiences that fans would appreciate—especially strong fans: 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.

As expected, online activities are a crucial aspect of fandom, especially as far as production is concerned. Liking or reposting political content published on the leaders' accounts was perhaps one of the most accessible and least demanding types of production: Predictably enough, about 9 out of 10 fans (86%) who follow leaders' social media accounts have liked or reposted, while 73% have commented on one of the leaders' posts, even if only with an emoji. Percentages increase among strong fans (92%, with 83% for fans). These actions appear to be part of the habitual online routines of fans, or at least those who are active within the digital space. However, a significant segment of our baseline group of fans is also involved in other online forms of production (40% of fans reposted memes about the leader; 31% used hashtags with the leader's name).

In general, our results confirm a close relationship between affective attachment and practices of political consumption and production: Strong fans are more inclined to engage in all the consumption and production activities we have explored.

8.6 THE OTHER FACE OF FANDOM: ANTI-FANDOM

In examining what fans do both online and offline, a fundamental distinction must be drawn between supportive fandom and affectively charged opposition to a political personality. 'Anti-fandom' was taken into consideration in both lines of research—the multi-country opinion poll and web analysis. Although it was not the subject of in-depth analysis, the basic figure is interesting and shows that anti-fandom is socially widespread. Across the seven European countries surveyed, 68% of citizens stated that there was a leader or political figure they 'really dislike[d]'. In the context of public sentiment, it is interesting to understand how citizens practise anti-fandom.

Political anti-fandom on Instagram is not a marginal phenomenon. Rather, it is a substantial part of digital participation that is nearly equivalent in prevalence to positive fandom. Unlike fandom, which focuses primarily on expressions of personal admiration and affective attachment to a leader, anti-fandom constitutes a markedly more political and critical configuration of attitudes. Its primary components are the disapproval of political actions and dislike of a leader's personality. This demonstrates that critiques of political substance and leaders' personalities are closely intertwined in the digital sphere.

The affective dimension of anti-fandom posts is characterised by a less diverse and more reactive emotional repertoire than that of positive fandom. While support for a leader is displayed through a range of emotions, such as love, esteem and hope, opposition tends to coalesce around dominant negative sentiments, such as anger and indignation. This emotional asymmetry reflects a posture of political resistance in the anti-fan; they do not seek emotional attachment but instead employ affective intensity to channel critical opinions that are frequently related to their perception of the targeted politician as illegitimate or inept in their actions.

Within this framework, anti-fandom targets specific leadership traits perceived as benchmarks of illegitimacy, with more than 64% of such posts describing leaders as incompetent, weak and ineffective. A significant portion of the content focuses on inconsistencies in political behaviour, while a smaller but notable percentage employs aesthetic and cultural delegitimation, portraying leaders as arrogant or out of touch with their country's social reality.

In other words, survey findings indicate that when citizens' expectations regarding the competence and effectiveness of political leaders go unfulfilled, this disappointment acts as a catalyst for criticism across social media platforms.

Regarding the producers of dissent, as mentioned previously, the data reveal a central distinction between institutional actors and ordinary users. The likelihood of a leader being targeted by anti-fans is heavily influenced by their institutional role and personal characteristics. Leaders holding government positions are 10 times more likely to be the target of attacks by anti-fans than are those in opposition.

This trend is largely attributable to the fact that governing figures must manage complex issues with limited resources and often struggle to fulfil their election promises, thereby engendering widespread public discontent. Additionally, gender disparities persist in these digital dynamics, as female political leaders are more frequently targeted by anti-fandom practices than their male peers.

This is partly attributable to the still regrettably widespread perception that politics is a sphere for which women are not particularly 'suited' and partly to the fact that the qualities of women engaged in political life are too often assessed by recourse to inappropriate, extra-political considerations, such as their physical attractiveness or elegance.

Finally, the intensity of anti-fandom varies significantly according to the national political climate. Within the analytical framework developed, Spain and France were comparatively more polarised than Italy, owing to recent institutional and electoral dynamics that have intensified that country's political competition.

In both cases, institutional fragility, narrow margins of political contestation and escalating discursive confrontation render antagonism structurally salient; this fosters communicative conditions that are particularly conducive to the diffusion of anti-fandom practices. In such highly polarised contexts, anti-fandom emerges as the dominant mode of expression not only among ordinary users but also among political actors, who may abandon celebratory communication in favour of systematically denigrating their opponents.

8.7 THE FANDOMESQUE

Analysis of social media provides a novel and important perspective on political fandom in that it critically engages with shifts in celebrity politics related to the widespread adoption of the medium. The main contribution of our work is the introduction and operationalisation of the concept of the *fandomesque*. The 'fandomesque' refers to a specific genre of political communication practised by political actors (i.e. party members, candidates and office-holders) who strategically mimic the stylised vernaculars and affective expressions of fandom.

Fan-like practices fuelling the popularity of Giorgia Meloni's digital persona have prompted a critical reappraisal of political fandom as a predominantly grassroots phenomenon. Oftentimes, political fandoms are regarded as communities formed by ordinary constituents and activists adopting fan-like practices to engage with high-visibility politicians. However, the empirical evidence gathered from the frequency and multi-modal analysis of the #GiorgiaMeloni hashtag suggests a more nuanced reality, where seemingly spontaneous as well as carefully constructed fan-like performances may intertwine.

This performance of fandom is not merely a byproduct of spontaneous digital enthusiasm; rather, it serves as a sophisticated tool for top-down visibility and legitimacy construction. By appropriating the aesthetics and tone of political fans, those engaging in *fandomesque* practices are able to

convey an image of the leader as someone who is extraordinarily popular and who has a relatable, approachable personality. Surely, political fandom can be seen as a sign of a demotic turn that has increasingly shaped Western politics—with the overlap of celebrity and politics, affect and personal connection have replaced traditional, rigidly codified ways of interacting with institutional actors. Nonetheless, the findings of this study indicate that with the mass adoption of social media, the boundaries between professional campaigning strategies and organic grassroots support can be blurred.

When the majority of fan-like content supporting a leader is strategically produced by political actors, as it was for the subject of the case study, the question of what a fan democracy would actually look like arises. This study suggests that the *fandomesque* functions as a strategy to simulate affectively charged support for a leader and in doing so simulates intimacy and authenticity, two core values of social media. Crucially, a key part of the argument is that the affordances of digital platforms such as Instagram can be leveraged to simulate a grassroots groundswell of support, with the ordinary user unable to distinguish it from what it pretends to be. For the individual political actor, producing *fandomesque* content fulfils a dual purpose: It enhances the leader's carefully curated image while simultaneously signalling the actor's own loyalty and commitment to the party hierarchy.

This 'double validation' process reinforces internal party cohesion and professional branding under the guise of affective, fan-like support. Furthermore, the results reveal a stark asymmetry in the performance of digital affect, thereby corroborating the results of the analysis previously carried out on this subject. While supportive content is frequently characterised by the *fandomesque*, the production of anti-fandom content remains largely the realm of ordinary users or other types of actors that have no personal investment in gathering consensus. Detractors tend to criticise Meloni in either personal or political terms; however, the communal hallmarks of *fandomesque* practices are only seldomly present in their interactions. By contrast, the practices of political actors supporting Meloni online display stronger communal dynamics, aligning more closely with what we might describe as organic fandom.

In sum, the study of the *fandomesque* highlights a significant mechanism in contemporary political communication: the strategic appropriation of seemingly spontaneous civic participation as a campaigning resource. By borrowing the vernacular of the fan, political actors can safely

navigate this new era of celebrity politics, where legitimacy is built through the simulation of interconnectedness and affective intimacy. This is even the case for high-visibility actors.

This dynamic necessitates a critical reappraisal of political fandom studies, as the simulation of grassroots support may prioritise leader-centric visibility over substantive democratic engagement. As we look towards the future of digital politics, the fandomesque stands as a testament to the sophistication of contemporary campaigning and to the challenges it poses to those who study it.

8.8 AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The analyses presented and discussed in this book have highlighted the importance of taking political fandom seriously. Our rich set of collected data allowed us to show that this phenomenon concerns, albeit with different nuances and gradations, a not insignificant segment of the population. Many individuals can be regarded as fans; many engage in typical fandom practices; many show a propensity to behave as fans. One could observe that we are still referring to a minority of citizens. However, given the propensity of political leaders to act as celebrities and create their own ‘political brands’ (Armannsdottir et al., 2019) that are not just a component of political parties’ brands (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025), we may presume that this phenomenon is destined to become more widespread.

It is also worth stressing that fandom is not just a frivolous way of approaching politics. The ‘entertainment’ factor that motivates people to be fans and have fun could lead to a dismissiveness about political fandom as not really relevant for political studies. However, if it is true that fandom relates to popular culture—in particular, forms of visual media culture that are not traditionally associated with politics—the emotional and affective sides are incontrovertibly key features of political phenomena, particularly within the framework of the ‘spectacularisation’ of political process and its related phenomena, including political populism, presidentialisation, celebrity politics and (social) media logic. For this reason, political fandom is a much more general phenomenon than one might think. It would be reductive to regard it as simply a way of connecting with previously detached people, as our findings about the profiles of fans showed. Indeed, fandom may also involve politically engaged citizens and potentially be a widespread phenomenon with no barriers around education and social status.

In light of all this, there is no doubt that further research is needed to determine if political fandom will produce a relevant change in political participation in our democracies in the future. We conclude this book by highlighting some issues that, in our opinion, should be kept under special observation and be investigated further.

First, as the analyses in this book have shown, political fandom is a valuable resource for politicians. Leaders may depend on fans to do important things for them. Fans make leaders popular and visible online, especially by disseminating memes and visual content; defend them from attacks; and improve their images by showing them as worthy of admiration and love. Thus, fans are an army at the service of the politician. However, what is the relationship between political celebrities and fans? Is the creation and maintenance of a political fandom always a grassroots, spontaneous phenomenon? And how do politicians manage their fans?

The fact that politicians are becoming more similar to other types of celebrities means that political consultants and communication staff may find inspiration in how stars of the entertainment industry are managed. On the one hand, this means that political fandom can be nurtured by offering appropriate opportunities for consumption and production. On the other hand, it implies trying to control and orientate fans' activities. As observed above, fans may potentially play the role of influencers on a leader's behalf, as they help to disseminate favourable content and attack negative content. The most active fans could become 'super supporters' (Stromer-Galley, 2019)—campaign staff might identify and contact them to get them to undertake activities on social media, especially less formal and institutional activities.

If this happens, it will mean a clear shift from a bottom-up dimension—a community of people that has spontaneously engaged itself in support of a leader—to a top-down dimension, that is, a fandom that is at least partially orchestrated by the leaders' staff. For politicians, this perspective is extremely promising in terms of attracting a larger pool of voters, since it allows a refreshing of traditional propaganda with the inclusion of elements from popular culture. In some cases, political fandom could be ascribed to that set of digital participatory experimentation that is breathing new life into parties and political organisations (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016).

The price to pay, however, may be a loss of spontaneity that, until now, has been the most fascinating element of political fandom. From the point

of view of the researcher, this implies a further challenge in being able to distinguish grassroots networks from much more controlled contexts and, in particular, from what we have called the *fandomesque*—fan-like performances promoted by politicians, especially when campaign staff lack transparency and prefer to give the impression that orchestrated activities are more spontaneous than they actually are.

In general, our evaluation of political fandom is positive. Following the insights of pioneers like Van Zoonen (2005), we acknowledge its potential for building political identities. Perhaps not all cases of fandom are positive, but like Penny (2017, p. 16) we are inclined to see it as a ‘welcome addition’ even when it cannot be defined as a form of ‘the affective intelligence lauded by Van Zoonen (2005)’ or the emotional realism detected by Pels (2003). This does not mean to deny that some degeneration of the interplay between celebrity politics and fandom may lead to excessive depoliticisation in the sense that emotions and the media spectacle replace, almost completely, political content, as stressed by authors like Gamson (1994, p. 189) or Moffitt (2016, p. 85). Nonetheless, we believe that, even if fandom is born around the figure of a leader, the activation of such feelings and motivations increases engagement and interest in politics. An individual that approaches politics casually through memes and viral videos could become a loyal supporter over time.

However, not all mechanisms underpinning political fandom can be regarded without concern. In our opinion, anti-fandom should attract scholars’ attention and requires further investigation. Studies of fandom have long considered anti-fandom a part of their field of inquiry (Click, 2019). The conspicuous evidence on anti-fandom in our analyses has convinced us that there is also a need in political studies for anti-fandom scholarship—it can certainly offer interesting insights and broaden the reflections on the much more heavily investigated phenomenon of affective polarisation. Starting from the awareness that anti-fandom and fandom are woven from a similar fabric of affectivity and even pleasure (if fans love to like, anti-fans love to hate),¹ political studies should invest further effort in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of anti-fandom.

¹ On the resemblance between fan and anti-fan behaviours see Gray (2019).

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APPENDIX

NOTE ON METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project was funded by the European Union (NextGenerationEU), under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104 published on 2 February 2022 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca), CUP F53D2300634006.

The project, entitled *Fandom Democracy? Celebrity and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement* (Fandom Democracy Project; FanDem; <https://www.fandomdemocracyproject.eu/>), involved a research team from three Italian academic institutions: the University of Bergamo, the University of Perugia, and the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Rosanna De Rosa from the University of Naples Federico II joined the Urbino unit.

The research design comprised two intertwined empirical lines of inquiry. The mixed-methods approach comprised a multi-country survey and a systematic content analysis of posts authored by citizens and political actors on a digital platform. The following pages outline the main research methods and techniques adopted by the working group.

Opinion Survey Design and Sampling Strategy

Ethical Approval

The *Fandem Project*'s, overall research design received ethical approval from the Committee for Integrity and Ethics of Research at the University of Bergamo (communication of 26 June 2024). Its questionnaire, sampling procedure, and the overall research design, received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee for Human Research (CESU) at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, as documented in the meeting minutes no. 83 dated 27 June 2024. The research protocol was determined to be in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU Regulation 2016/679), which establishes the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data as a fundamental right (<https://www.uniurb.it/ateneo/identita/portale-web-di-ateneo/privacy-policy-english-version>).

Furthermore, the procedures concerning the retrieval, storage, and access of social media data were approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Perugia (minutes of meeting no. 31, of 26 June 2024), in accordance with its regulatory standards and the University's policies (<https://www.unipg.it/files/statuto-regolamenti/statuti/statuto-comitato-bioetica.pdf>).

Data Collection and Sampling Design

Data collection was conducted by the Italian polling organization Demetra [Opinioni.net](https://www.opinioni.net) from 29 July to 7 August 2024, utilizing the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique. Respondents were selected through quota sampling to ensure representation across key sociodemographic variables, such as gender, age group, educational attainment level, and geographical area.

Table A1 Sample size
by country

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Bulgaria	1,044
France	1,026
Germany	1,006
Italy	1,021
Poland	1,049
Spain	1,011
UK	1,004
Total	7,161

The seven nationally representative samples (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom [UK]) comprised just over 1,000 cases each, ranging from $n = 1,004$ (UK) to $n = 1,049$ (Poland), as detailed in Table A1, for an overall sample size of $N = 7,161$. The margin of sampling error for country-level estimates is approximately $\pm 2.6\%$ at the 95% confidence level. Using a maximum of two contact attempts, the final achieved sample sizes were as follows:

Weighting Procedure

A post-stratification weighting procedure was implemented to align sample distributions with known population parameters. This approach reduced non-response bias and improved the precision of overall survey estimates. The weighting procedure also incorporated the relative population size of each country, so that aggregated figures represent the combined population of the seven countries when total values are presented in the analyses.

The Fandom Democracy Project Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised seven thematic sections: (A) standard sociodemographic variables; (B) respondents' media consumption styles; (C) socio-political orientation, core values, and voting choice; (D) political fandom affective engagement, including associated consumption and production practices; (E) anti-fandom orientations; (F) entertainment celebrity fandom attitudes and practices; and (G) political attitudes and participation behaviour.

Translated versions of the questionnaire were circulated among members of the FanDem Research Project International Board and country-specific subject-matter experts from each participating nation to ensure terminological and linguistic consistency across comparative contexts. The preliminary draft of the questionnaire was pilot-tested ($n = 208$) across the seven countries included in the Fandom Democracy Project to assess the validity and appropriateness of both the questions and response formats. The pilot responses were not included in the final dataset.

A. STANDARD SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

1. **Country**
2. **Municipality**
3. **Gender**
4. **Year of birth**

5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- None or primary school leaving certificate
- Secondary School up to the compulsory school leaving age
- Secondary education diploma (beyond the compulsory school leaving age)
- University/Higher Education

6. What is your current job?

- Labourer
- Technician, office worker, civil servant
- Manager
- Trader
- Craftsman
- Freelancer (Lawyer, doctor, quantity surveyor...)
- Businessman
- Student (including students who work)
- Housewife, Homemaker, Home duties
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Armed forces/Voluntary civil service
- Other

7. In which sector do you work/did you work?

- Public
- Private

B. RESPONDENTS' MEDIA CONSUMPTION STYLES

8. To keep up-to-date, what media have you most frequently used recently?

All your answers must be different and you must rank in order. Please select at most 2 answers.

- Websites/apps or social media pages of daily newspapers or news magazines
- Social media such as Facebook-Meta, X-Twitter, Instagram or others

- Printed newspapers and magazines
- Television: news or talk shows
- Radio news broadcasts or radio programs
- Information podcasts
- I have tried to avoid news

C. SOCIO-POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR

9. How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?

Please choose only one of the following.

- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested

10. Many people use the terms "left" and "right" when talking about politics. The following is a row of boxes running from left to right. When thinking about your political views, in which box would you place yourself?

- 0=Left
- 10=Right
- I would not position myself

11. Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?

Please choose only one of the following.

- Yes
- No

12. What is the party you feel close to?

Answer only if "Yes" at question #11. Please choose only one of the following.

- List of political parties by country.

13. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this political party?

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

14. In the [date and name of the country] general elections, which party did you vote for?

Please choose only one of the following.

- List of political parties by country.
- Other party [*Specify*]
- Blank ballot / null ballot
- I did not vote
- I was not old enough to vote

15. Would you say you voted mainly for [name of the political party voted] or for [name of the political party leader]?

Answer only if “a political party” was indicated in question #14. Please choose only one of the following.

- Political party voted
- Leader of political party voted

16. You will find a list of the names of some political figures below. If you know them, please indicate how you rate them, giving them a grade from 0 to 10, where 0 means a completely negative rating and 10 a completely positive rating. If you do not know them, please indicate "I do not know him/her". On the other hand, if you cannot make a judgement, please state "I don't know".

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

- List of political party leaders by country
- 0=Completely negative opinion
- 10=Completely positive opinion
- I do not know him/her
- I don't know

17. In your opinion, is it important for politicians and the media to disclose details of the private lives of politicians?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, it helps to know and judge politicians better
- Yes, I am curious
- No, it is not important to me
- No, because it distracts from the things that matter

D. POLITICAL FANDOM, AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT, CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION PRACTICES

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

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

19. Who is this [name of the country] leader or political figure to whom you feel close?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

20. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this [name of the country] leader or political figure?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

21. For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order. Please select at most 3 answers.

- For being competent and capable
- For understanding the problems of the people
- For sharing his/her ideas and political vision

- For being likeable
- For being a real, authentic person
- For being an honest person
- For being the only one who can save [name of the country]

22. Referring to this leader or political figure, would you say that...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- he/she is a charming person
- I like the way he/she dresses
- I like his/her lifestyle

23. Also, regarding this leader or political figure, have you recently...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?
- in particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?
- read a biography/autobiography about him/her?
- seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?

24. Again, regarding this leader or political figure, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

25. In respect of his/her social media accounts, have you ever...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #24. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- “like” or repost his/her content
- follow one of his/her live video
- comment on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon)

26. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I follow it
- Yes, but I don't follow it
- No

27. Why do you follow these social accounts or pages?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #26. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order. Please select at most 2 answers.

- I find it entertaining
- I am interested in following pages about the leader
- I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the leader
- I feel part of a community

28. Regarding this leader or political figure, have you ever...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- ...reposted/retweeted memes about him/her
- ...used hashtags with his/her name
- ...written posts/tweets about him/her?
- ...created and circulated a meme, hashtag or social media page about him/her?

29. Still considering this leader or political figure, how much do you identify with each of the following sentences, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not identify with it at all and 10 that you identify with it completely?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

0=I don't identify with it all

10= I identify with it completely

- I love him/her as if he/she were my friend
- When the media or other politicians or network users criticise him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me
- I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do
- I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her
- I would like to take a selfie with him/her
- I would buy merchandise (a T-shirt/mug/something else) with his/her name or face on it

E. ANTI-FANDOM ORIENTATIONS

30. Thinking about the people who have a political role in [name of the country] right now, is there a leader or a political figure you really dislike?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

31. Who is this [name of the country] leader or political figure that you really dislike?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30.

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

32. Regarding this leader or political figure you really dislike, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

33. In respect of his/her social media accounts, have you ever...

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30.

- comment negatively on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon)

34. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other account or page critical of this leader or political figure that you really dislike?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, I also follow it and leave comments
- Yes, I follow it but don't leave any comments
- Yes, but I don't follow it
- No

F. STAR FANDOM ORIENTATIONS

35. Is there a current celebrity or star in sport, entertainment (film, music, etc.), media (TV personality, social media, etc.), fashion or culture who you admire or are a fan of?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

36. Who is this celebrity or star? (if more than one, please indicate the celebrity you relate to the most)

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

37. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this celebrity or star?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

38. For what reasons do you like this celebrity or star?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order.

Please select at most 3 answers.

- For being good at his/her job
- For being one of us

- For sharing his/her ideas
- For being likeable
- For being a real, authentic person
- For being a good person
- For being unique and extraordinary

39. About this celebrity or star, would you say that...?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- he/she is a charming person
- I like how he/she dresses
- I like his/her lifestyle

40. Also speaking about this celebrity or star, have you recently...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?
- in particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?
- read a biography/autobiography about him/her?
- seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?

41. Again, regarding this celebrity or star, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- Yes
- No

42. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social accounts or pages dedicated to the celebrity or star we have talked about so far?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I follow it
- Yes, but I don’t follow it
- No

43. As regards these unofficial pages or social media accounts, you follow them because...

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #42. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order.

Please select at most 2 answers.

- I find it entertaining
- I am interested in following pages about him/her
- I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about him/her
- I feel part of a community

44. Still considering this celebrity or political star, how much do you identify with each of the following sentences, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not identify with it at all and 10 that you identify with it completely?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35.

0=I don’t identify with it all

10= I identify with it completely

- I love him/her as if he/she were my friend
- When the media or other people or network users criticise him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me
- I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do
- I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her
- I would like to take a selfie with him/her
- I would buy merchandising (a T-shirt/mug/something else) with his/her name or face on it

45. Do you know if this celebrity or star has ever supported any political or social causes?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I shared his/her position
- Yes, but I did not share his/her position
- No, but if he/she did, I would consider his/her opinion
- No, but if he/she did it would not be relevant to me

46. Has this celebrity or star ever aligned him/herself with a candidate or politician?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and his/her opinion was important to me
- Yes, but his/her opinion did not matter to me
- No, but if he/she did, I would consider his/her opinion
- No, but if he/she did it would not be relevant to me

G. POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND PARTICIPATION

47. How often in the last year have you participated in the following activities?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Every month, Two or Three times a year, Once a year, Never.

- Political / party demonstrations
- Public protest demonstrations
- Political discussions via the Internet (websites, blogs, discussion groups, Facebook, X, etc.)

48. Have you ever...

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- gone out canvassing or campaigning for a candidate, list or party (leafleting, stalls, etc.)?

49. How much do you trust the following institutions?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Very much, Somewhat, Not Much, Not at all

- European Union
- [Name of the country] parliament

50. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with...

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

- the economic situation in the [name of the country]
- the economic situation of your family
- how democracy works in the [name of the country]

51. I will now present some views on very topical issues. Can you tell me how much you agree with each of them?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Very much, Somewhat, Not Much, Not at all

- Immigrants are a danger to public order and safety
- People like me matter little in today's society
- Today's world causes me anxiety

52. Which of these statements do you agree with most?

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- Democracy is preferable to any other form of government
- In some circumstances, an authoritarian regime might be preferable to a democratic system
- Whether authoritarian or democratic, it makes little difference to me

53. Which of these statements would you agree with most?

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- The country needs to be led by a strong leader
- Strong leaders are a danger to democracy

Submit your survey. Thank you for completing this survey!

Content Analysis of Instagram Posts

The Exploratory Study

The first field analysis was conducted using Meta's proprietary data extraction tools for Facebook and Instagram, and it focused on Italy as a pilot case-study. An exploration of the digital landscape of political fan-pages and accounts was conducted, revealing that relevant activity throughout the previous year (from 22/05/2023 to 22/05/2024) was infrequent and that most fan-pages related to high-profile Italian leaders were virtually inactive (see Table A2 and Table A3).

Moreover, a qualitative focus on the most active pages employing netnographic approaches revealed that the grassroots nature of their content and purpose was questionable, as they seemed to reproduce and disseminate content similar to that circulated by party and politicians' accounts in

Table A2 Active fan-pages (22/05/2023–22/05/2024)

<i>Page name</i>	<i>Posts in the last year</i>	<i>Followers</i>
Lebimbedigiuseppeconte I	114	207,994
Fanpage su Giuseppe Conte		
Giuseppe Conte Fanpage ♥	83	5,594
Giuseppe Conte Brazil Support	58	71,217
Elly Schlein Biella	19	2,591
Giorgia Meloni News	4	1,254
Elly Schlein combatte la povertà	2	329
Giuseppe Conte Fanpage	1	5,564
Giuseppe Conte Premier	1	3,245
Lucca per Elly Schlein	1	229
Parte da Noi - Massa Carrara per Elly Schlein	1	109

Table A3 Fan-pages
for each leader as of
22/05/24

<i>Leader</i>	<i>N. of fan-pages on Instagram</i>
Elly Schlein	34
Matteo Salvini	19
Giuseppe Conte	16
Giorgia Meloni	5
Total	74

their campaigning activities. Hence, we devised a method of data collection that was not dependent upon the study of fan-pages that were identified to be highly contingent, volatile phenomena.

The Data Collection Process

Our approach to the digital landscape is informed by Zizi Papacharissi’s *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (2014), in which hashtags are framed as contested spaces. In these spaces, collective meanings are co-constructed through the alignment of affective and cognitive processes manifesting in the production and circulation of social media content. Accordingly, we employed the software 4k Stogram to extract all metadata of the posts published with the hashtags containing the name and surname of four prominent leaders from each country¹. Because the literature on political fandom—notably the work of Jonathan Dean and

¹Specifically, for Italy, we selected #GiorgiaMeloni, #MatteoSalvini, #GiuseppeConte, #EllySchlein. For Spain, #PedroSanchez, #yolandadiaz, #SantiagoAbascal, #isabeldiazayuso. For France, #raphaelglucksmann, #MarineLePen, #EmmanuelMacron, #Melenchon. The

Cornel Sandvoss—identifies election campaigns as pivotal moments for the emergence of fan-like behaviours, we focused our data extraction on May and the first ten days of June 2024, leading up to the EU elections.

Analytical Framework

Following the extraction of the metadata, we developed a codebook deductively, based on the existing literature on political fandom. We then piloted the codebook on a preliminary dataset to fine-tune the categories and ensure that our theoretical framework aligned with the empirical data. Table A4 presents the final codebook used for the entire dataset, including definitions for each category.

To identify several of the categories presented in Table A4, we used a multimodal² approach. This involved analysing biographical descriptions to determine the account-holder's background as well as examining super-imposed text and captions to infer the meaning and origin of the posted images.

Finally, to gain a deeper understanding of fan-like content, we employed a qualitative approach, applying a social semiotic framework for visual analysis.³ Specifically, we examined the symbolic processes attributed to the posts through four key analytical concepts:

- Represented subjects: all human and non-human subjects occupying a prominent part of the frame. Key aspects shaping their significance include their compositional placement and their positioning relative to the camera.
- Modality: the degree of representational accuracy, where high modality indicates an accurate depiction of the subject, while low modality suggests the representation has been altered.
- Circumstances of accompaniment: the social or symbolic relationships between the participants shown in the shot and between them and the leader.
- Spatial circumstances: the setting and background elements discernible in a shot, which may provide additional layers of meaning to the image.

last hashtag was selected after using #JeanLucMelenchon returned much lower results as compared to the other French leaders analysed.

²The multimodal analysis was conducted following Kress, G. (2013). Multimodal discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 61–76). Routledge.

³Specifically, we based our visual approach on the categories devised by Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.

Table A4 Codebook used for the entire dataset, including the categories employed and their definitions

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Attitude towards the leader (entire post)	
Personal admiration of the leader	Expressions of personal admiration unrelated to political roles. Includes vague or nonspecific praise focusing on the leader's character, appearance, or personality rather than on political substance
Approval of political performance	Expressions of approval of the results achieved by the politician
Participation in the leader's "supporter community"	Expressions of satisfaction with the experience of undertaking supporter activities, either alone or with others
Disapproval of political performance	Expressions of disagreement with the leader's political actions
Personal dislike	Expressions of dislike of the leader based on their personal characteristics
Antagonism towards the leader's "supporter community"	Expressions of opposition to the leader's supporters or to the group/party the leader belongs to (often personified by the leader)
N.A. (stop coding)	
Apparent affective stimulus towards the leader	
Love, esteem, or admiration	Explicit expressions of attachment, admiration, or personal support
Anger, hatred, or contempt	Expressions of hostility towards the leader
Interest or approval	Positive comments on specific actions or characteristics of the leader
Hope, trust, or encouragement	Expressions of support or invitations to support someone/something
Indignation, dissatisfaction, or shame	Explicit criticism or grievances directed at specific actors or general political conditions
Other	Contains nonspecific emotional content or general affective markers
N.A. (stop coding)	
Post theme	
Leader off-duty	The post shows the leader engaged in activities unrelated to their work or public role
Leader at work	Visual or textual evidence of the leader performing official functions or participating in formal policy-making
External networking	The leader is depicted with other politicians outside of routine office or work environments

(continued)

Table A4 (continued)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Celebrity association	The leader is shown alongside famous non-political figures
Civic interaction	The leader is shown interacting with supporters and ordinary citizens
Public performance	Captures the leader in high-profile public roles, such as addressing rallies or leading protests
Decontextualized leader	Representation of the leader without indications of the context
Fan self-representation	Activities by the page owner reflecting their dedication to the leader (e.g., fan-made content) without direct interaction
Stance (public debate)	Comments on speeches, interviews, or statements by/about the leader or their political group
Promotional content (non-commercial)	Promoting the leader's activities to increase online/offline visibility
Commercial content	Promotion of products for sale
Other	A relevant fandom-related theme not yet identified
Representation of the leader	
Successful/skilled	Highlights the leader's specific skills, professional competencies, or leadership traits
Party/candidate support	Depicts the leader engaged in partisan advocacy or supporting fellow party members
Honest/consistent	Illustrates consistency between the leader's personal conduct and their stated political values
Aesthetically attractive	Expressions of admiration for the leader's physical appearance or aesthetic style
Energetic/aggressive	Captures the leader exhibiting affective intensity, passion, or charismatic energy
Close to the people/"one of us"	Portrays the leader in relatable, everyday settings or engaging in routine interactions with citizens
Incompetent/weak/ineffective	Claims the leader is incompetent, unfit, or otherwise unqualified for their institutional role
Inconsistent	Emphasizes a perceived disconnect between the leader's public values and their private actions
Unattractive/grotesque	Features a satirical or distorted representation of the leader's physical traits
Snobbish	Portrays the leader as elitist, out of touch, or detached from the concerns of ordinary citizens
N.A.	The leader is entirely absent from the content (textual and visual)
Does the post contain irony?	
Celebratory/positive	Affirmative humour or jokes intended to enhance the leader's public image

(continued)

Table A4 (continued)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Denigrating/negative N.A.	Mockery directed at the leader
Leader's attire	
Formal	Suit and tie (men) or business suit (women)
Smart casual	Shirt without tie (men) and/or without jacket (women)
Informal	Informal or casual attire (e.g., sportswear, t-shirts, or workwear)
Explicit comparison	
Political opposition	Political antagonism or conflict between the leader and other political actors
Media opposition	Media antagonism or conflict between the leader and journalists/media outlets
Media support	Consensus or alignment between the leader's stance and media actors
Political support	Shared goals or proximity with other political actors
N.A.	No reference to other actors
Party symbol present?	Yes / No
Visual cultural references	
Pop	References to contemporary popular culture
Intrinsically political	Political symbols (flags, EU, non-partisan political orgs)
Religious	References to religion
Gastronomic	Food, beverages, or agricultural products
Sporting	Symbols of sports organizations, personalities, or events
Law enforcement/military N.A.	References to the police or armed forces
Publisher profile	
Ordinary user	Ordinary individual not fitting other categories
Hashtag leader	The leader the hashtag refers to
Other political actor	Professional politician (not the hashtag leader)
Party (national/local)	Official page of a political party
News or meme pages	General interest, news, or meme-focused pages
Political (anti-)fan-page	Page focused on a politician or political cause (positive or negative)
Media actors	Journalist or news website page
Non-political celebrity	High-profile, non-political figure
Media extracts?	Yes (direct/indirect quotes)/no
Post type	Photo, photo with text, collage, screenshot, infographic, caricature, text only
Selfie	Yes/no