



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

D. Campus (✉)

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

e-mail: donatella.campus@unibg.it

L. Ceccarini

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

M. Mazzoni

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

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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