



Fans Will Be Fans? Comparing Fandoms in the Political and Star Systems

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4.1 THE CELEBRITY–FAN RELATIONSHIP ACROSS DIFFERENT DOMAINS

In the context of the personalisation (McAllister, 2007), privatisation and intimisation of politics (Atia & Balmas, 2025; Rojek, 2016), following Van Zoonen (2004) and later Sandvoss (2012), we might expect political constituencies to increasingly mirror the dynamics that characterise fan communities. That is to say, we might expect to see political leaders performing celebrity roles (Street, 2004); citizen-voters acting as the leaders' followers; and those same citizens conceiving of themselves as members of a fan community. This involves practices of consumption and production of political narratives and contents in the media space, while forms of “intimacy at distance” are favoured by the digital media.

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Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Chap. 2 and drawing upon the main dimensions characterising fan communities in the star systems, the previous chapter aimed to identify the measures of political leaders' fandom in seven European countries, study its profile and internal dynamics. Using the same data, the present chapter tests to what extent leader–follower relationships in the political domain follow the same logic(s) underlying celebrity–fan relationships in other domains of public life, such as the world of entertainment, arts, and sports. While these dynamics are often studied from the point of view of the celebrities or political leaders themselves (Street, 2004), we analyse the relationship with their fans from the point of view of the latter.

Are fans of other types of celebrities or stars more likely to hold forms of personalised followership regarding political leaders? Can we imagine something as a “latent predisposition to be fan” that travels across different domains, uniting the political system and the star system? In attempting to answer these questions—which we may summarise with a formula recalling this chapter's title: *Fans Will Be Fans?*—we also aim to offer insights by addressing three more specific subsets of questions: (1) What is the overlap between star-fandom and political-fandom?¹ (2) To what extent do the internal dynamics of political leader fandom mirror those characterising star fandoms, in terms of mechanisms of personal attraction, modes of consumption and community logic(s)? In particular, is the weight of private, intimate, emotion-driven, and celebrity-status-related factors in individual attraction to political leaders comparable to what we can observe in the case of stars, celebrities, and influencers? (3) Do the political communities “resemble” in terms of their socio-demographic traits the profile of star fandoms?

¹ In this contribution, the terms “political fandom” and “leader fandom” are interchangeable, as they both represent an abbreviation of “political leader fandom”, while describing, given our operationalisation, the same phenomenon. However, from a theoretical standpoint, we do not necessarily wish to exclude the presence of political fans who are not fans of single political figures, but, e.g. of political parties (van Zoonen, 2004; Sandvoss, 2012). While the “star fandom” wording more explicitly refers to single figures, we similarly see fans of collective entities, such as sport teams (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2004), to which the word “fan” is commonly used. Nevertheless, others put into question the very possibility of being fans of political parties, explicitly differentiating the word *fan*, which can only be applied to fans of individual figures, from *enthusiastic supporter*, which can also be applied to collective entities (Lee & Moon, 2021). In our fandom operationalisation, we similarly adopt a clear-cut approach. To include fans/supporters of collective entities, such an operationalisation should have followed a different logic from the one we use in this chapter, as the survey question wordings are specifically tailored to capture fans of individual figures.

The chapter is organised as follows. The next section provides the methodological coordinates for the comparison of political and star fandoms and illustrates their measures across the studied countries. The third section identifies different components of society as regards their joint or exclusive inclusion in the political and star fandom, studying the degree of their overlap. The fourth section presents a parallel description of the two fandoms. Using comparable indicators, it first explores the individual motivations of the followers between the two social groups. Then, it compares degrees of consumption and the presence of community orientations. The following section (5) uses logit models to detect the main traits characterising the socio-demographic profile of the two fandoms. The final section (6) summarises the main findings of these analyses.

4.2 OPERATIONALISATION AND PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The multi-country survey questionnaire was designed to provide comparable measures of the demand side of fan/celebrity relationships across the political system and the star system. This was necessary to maintain the comparative approach of the study, even though the two domains are characterised by distinct features and logics.

We identify the social reach of the star fandom phenomenon using the same approach discussed in the previous chapter to construct the baseline typology of political leader fandom. In particular, we combine the same two dimensions of affect—*closeness* and *emotionality*—as the primary criteria for inclusion in the area of fandom. We ground our operationalisation of citizens' *closeness* on two survey questions—(1) for the political domain, and (2) for the world of sport, entertainment, etc.—worded as follows:

1. *Thinking of people who have a political role in [COUNTRY] right now, is there a leader or political figure you feel close to?*
2. *Is there a current celebrity or star in sport, entertainment (film, music, etc.), media (TV personality, social media, etc.), fashion or culture whom you admire or are a fan of?*

Those who responded affirmatively to the first question were included in the area of political fandom, while those who responded affirmatively to the second one were included in the star fandom group.

It should be stressed that only the second question, referring to the star system, explicitly mentioned the word “fan” in its wording, reflecting the

habitual use of that term in this domain. The decision to avoid the term in reference to the political domain was made knowingly to avoid biasing the interviewees' responses and allow the status of political fan to emerge naturally from the analysis.

We acknowledge that the first question, explicitly focused on the national context, is structurally more restrictive. Nevertheless, the choice is justified by different considerations. The main focus of the research regards the political domain, and the mechanisms of political representation are mainly anchored to the national state. Even if one may be a fan of a foreign or international leader, it seems reasonably justified to frame the political fandom phenomenon within the national borders. On the contrary, the star system naturally extends beyond the national borders.² From a methodological point of view, this implies that our definition of star fandom is structurally broader (or less restrictive) when compared to political fandom. This may attenuate the measures of association that will be presented in the next sessions. However, this structural attenuation also corresponds to a more conservative approach: If a statistically significant association between the two types of fandom emerges, this provides robust evidence of a general tendency for individuals to participate in fandoms across those domains.

The second inclusion criterion, like the first, concerns the *affectivity* dimension, but in this case, it is specifically centred on the *emotional* sphere. For star fans, it is based on the same set of two questions used for political fans. Namely, we asked respondents, on a 0–10 scale, to what extent they identified with two statements regarding their preferred political leader or star, respectively:

1. *I love him/her as if he/she were my friend.*
2. *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.*

We designed the first sentence to capture a form of emotionality related to “intimacy at distance” (Rojek, 2016), whereas the second aims to measure the emotional response triggered by (mediated) forms of polarisation (Barnes, 2022). Finally, we combined the resulting variables into an

² In the exploratory investigation presented below, however, concerning the target figures of these fandoms, we find that the most important stars in each country hold the same nationality of respondents. Thus, whilst celebrity fandoms are certainly transnational phenomena, the country-level is not irrelevant.

additive index ranging from 0 to 10. We use its values to distinguish between the exclusion (0–4) and the inclusion into the fandom subsample(s), as well as between two degrees of individual affect: *moderate* (5–7) and *strong* (8–10).

Defined and operationalised as such, the star fandom phenomenon encompasses a slightly larger component of the voting-age population: 32%, compared to the 24% included in the political fandom. This means that about one citizen out of three across the seven European countries emerges as having an affective bond with individual figures of the star system, broadly understood to include not only the entertainment industry but also the fields of arts, culture, and sports. These individuals can be defined as fans of such celebrities. Thus, this fandom can be related to the corresponding group identified in the political domain, to test the extent to which they overlap and resemble each other in terms of their drivers, profile, and internal dynamics.

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the specific “objects” of the star fandom and their distribution across its different domains. However, in the questionnaire, we decided to include an open-ended question, in which respondents were asked to provide the name of their preferred star. Responses were largely dominated by references to the world of music industry and, predominantly, of sports. Indeed, the most cited celebrity in each country is a national sporting figure: from football, as Hristo Stoičkov in Bulgaria and David Beckham in the UK³; from basket, such as Dennis Schröder in Germany; from swimming, such as Léon Marchand in France; and tennis, such as Rafael Nadal (and Carlos Alcaraz) in Spain, Jannik Sinner in Italy, and Iga Świątek in Poland.

Grouping all fans, in the cross-national descriptive analysis presented in Table 4.1, we first note a significant degree of variation among the seven countries in terms of the magnitude of the star fandom phenomenon. To some extent, this reflects the same ranking analysed in the previous chapter with regard to political fandom. Further, it is worth noting that in all countries but two—Poland and France—the prevalence of star fans is higher compared to that of political ones. This was largely expected, given

³ Interestingly, the two football players who emerge in this investigation are retired from professional football, which they have not been playing for over twenty years (Stoičkov) and over ten years (Beckham). Yet, their celebrity status remains intact, even if it is no longer supported by their current sporting performances.

Table 4.1 Cross-national percentages of political and star fans. Strong fans percentages between parentheses

	<i>BG</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>FR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>PL</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Europe</i>
Leader fans	23.9	9.0	30.4	27.0	29.3	39.3	21.8	24.0
(strong leader fans)	(8.3)	(3.6)	(12.4)	(12.4)	(11.6)	(21.5)	(9.8)	(10.6)
Star fans	35.8	22.8	44.9	24.4	36.9	36.5	34.0	31.9
(strong star fans)	(17.5)	(8.2)	(22.4)	(11.8)	(17.5)	(22.4)	(15.9)	(15.2)

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

both the “popular” and everyday nature of engagement with (and media consumption of) the star system.

Germany emerges as the country with the lowest share of population included in the star fandom (23%)—a 9-point gap from the cross-country average. Nevertheless, this result about star fandom in Germany is significantly larger compared to the country’s 9% of political fans—a striking 15-point difference from the average. For the star fandom, we observe a similarly low percentage in France (24%), where, on the contrary, fans of celebrities are less than political fans (27%). We find a higher number of star fans in the United Kingdom (34%), Bulgaria (36%), Poland (37%), and Italy (37%). The highest value overall is registered in Spain, where 45% of respondents are included in this group. It is noteworthy that the three countries with the largest proportions of star fans also display the highest levels of political fandom, though the ranking differs, with Poland emerging as the national case with the highest share of political fans.

4.3 MATCHING THE POLITICAL AND STAR FANDOMS

The similar magnitude of the two fandoms and their correlation at the country level do not reveal, per se, an overlap at the individual level. In this section, we will examine the individual association in the overall sample and across the seven countries.

The cross-tabulations reported reveal how the prevalence of political fans increases moving from star non-fans to star-fans: it more than doubles, rising from just 15% to 43% (Table 4.2). Given the dichotomous operationalisation of the two variables, we measure the tetrachoric correlation between leader and star fandom. For the whole sample, the tetrachoric rho is 0.48 ($p < 0.001$), exhibiting a present, yet moderate,

Table 4.2 The overlap of leader and star fandom (%)

	<i>Not star fans</i>	<i>Star fans</i>	<i>Total</i>
Not leader fans	58.0	18.1	76.0
Leader fans	10.1	13.9	24.0
Total	68.1	31.9	100.0
Not leader fans	85.2	56.6	76.0
Leader fans	14.9	43.4	24.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

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

correlation between the two groups of fandoms. Its statistical significance is confirmed in all seven countries, which, however, exhibit differences in the strength of the correlation.⁴

Table 4.2 also reports the relative percentages of the joint distribution of the two fandom variables, thereby providing a descriptive quantification of the four groups deriving from their possible combinations. The area of non-fandom is predictably high and comprises more than half of the population: 58%. Conversely, this means that more than 40% of respondents have affective bonds with a figure from either the political system or the star system, or from both of them. The areas of “exclusive” fandom are sizable, especially regarding celebrities from the star system: 10% are fans of a political leader but not of a star, while 18% are fans of a star but not of a political figure. The most interesting segment, however, comprises those who may be termed “total fans”: individuals who have developed forms of closeness and emotional attachment to both political and non-political figures, representing the 14% of respondents.

The association between being fan of a celebrity in the two realms cannot, on its own, be used as a test of the presence of a common latent predisposition. However, descriptive evidence on the co-occurrence of the two phenomena can suggest preliminary insights into the possible presence of similar mechanisms behind them. The next two sections further develop this interpretation collecting evidence about the presence of: (a)

⁴We observe the lowest ρ in Poland (0.39) and France (0.44), the highest in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (0.55). It is worth recalling that Poland and France are also the only countries in which the prevalence of political fandom is higher compared to that of star fandom.

similar fandom-like dynamics, in terms of sources of personal attraction, practices of consumption, and sense of community belonging and (b) at least a partially similar profile, in terms of the demographic and political traits displayed by two groups of fans.

4.4 COMPARATIVE DESCRIPTION OF LEADER VS. STAR FANDOMS

After having described the overlap between the leader and star fandoms, in this section, we carry out a comparative description of the two groups, from the point of view of: (1) the reasons for which those we classified as fans admire the political leader or star they support; (2) the degree of consumption within the fandoms of leader/star-related content, both online and offline; and (3) their propensity to be involved in a community of like-minded peers. All the analyses in this section are based on the two separate subsamples (political leader fandom and star fandom). For each analysis, we report percentages which are weighted for each country’s population, as well as for the respective distribution of gender, age class, and education.

First, in Table 4.3, we report the self-assessed reasons for liking the mentioned political leader or preferred star. This table presents results

Table 4.3 Reasons to like the leader vs. the star between leader and star fandom for two parallel but different sets of response options

<i>For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure? [Rank 1+2+3]</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>	<i>For what reasons do you like this celebrity or star? [Rank 1+2+3]</i>
For being competent and capable	48.1	51.9	For being good at his/her job
For sharing his/her ideas and political vision	48.0	22.8	For sharing his/her ideas
For understanding the problems of the people	41.7	18.3	For being one of us
For being an honest person	41.5	34.5	For being a good person
For being a real, authentic person	39.7	53.9	For being a real, authentic person
For being the only one who can save the country	31.6	50.4	For being unique and extraordinary
For being likeable	19.4	33.3	For being likeable

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

from a survey question in which respondents were asked to rank up to three reasons for their preference for a particular political leader or star, choosing from seven closed-ended options. The table displays the aggregated percentages for each category. Response categories were designed to mirror those used for political leader fandom, enabling direct comparison between the two types of fandom. However, certain categories were adapted to better reflect the specific characteristics of each domain.

The most chosen motivations to like the political leader or political figure, either as first, second, or third choice, are “[I like him/her...] ...for being competent and capable” and “...for sharing his/her ideas and political vision”. Both are chosen by slightly less than half of the political fandom subsample. The fact that the leader or political figure is “likeable” is the least chosen category, with only 19.4% of respondents in this subsample opting for this option. Looking at the overall distribution, the star fandom sees a clearer split between the most chosen categories—“[I like him/her...] ...for being good at his/her job”, “...for being a real, authentic person”, and “...for being unique and extraordinary”, each accounting for over half of the star fandom subsample—and the least chosen one, i.e., “For being one of us”, selected by only 18.3% of the subsample.

The differences between the two fandoms disclose specific logics, which may point to differing expectations that fans hold from the person they admire, and that perhaps even suggest differences in the very nature of the two phenomena. Yet, similarities are present. Fans of political leaders are mostly attracted by leaders’ tangible capabilities, such as competence in their political role, and by their political vision, which they share. Star fans also highlight the star’s competence (“being good at his/her job”), but conversely declare to like this person because of his/her attributes, either “being authentic” or “being unique and extraordinary”.

The symmetry across the two fandoms tells us that in both cases fandoms are driven by a competence evaluation (*what they can do*), which only then translates into an affective attachment. However, the person’s attributes (*who they are*) mainly matter for the star fandom, while political fandoms for the most part follow political consideration (*what is the political vision* [the leader] *embodies* and his/her *understanding of people’s problems*), with likability itself, perhaps surprisingly, ranking as the last reason for which one likes a politician. Feelings related to an intimacy “at distance” are more clearly visible in the star fandom—given that, in this case, affectivity is not based on an established proximity. Thus, what matters in

the star fandom is the celebrity being “extraordinary”, whereas in political fandom, closeness to people’s problems emerges as an important characteristic.

An intimacy, the one in regard to a political figure, that, when developed, cannot feel too much “at a distance”. Hence, to be admired, politicians must get off the high horse the stars may sometimes walk on. Nevertheless, it is important to stress how authenticity and likeability, despite being secondary to other motivations, are cited by significant portions of the political fandom as well.

In Table 4.4, and again across the two fandoms, we present percentages about fans’ online and offline consumption of leader or celebrity-related content, such as news articles, biographies, social media pages,

Table 4.4 Fandom consumption across leader and star fandoms. Percentages exhibited

<i>Regarding this leader or political figure/this celebrity or star, have you recently...</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?		
Yes	60.0	66.7
In particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?		
Yes	44.9	50.8
Read a biography/autobiography about him/her?		
Yes	43.6	52.6
Seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?		
Yes	60.9	57.4
<i>Again, regarding this leader or political figure/celebrity or star, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Yes	55.8	67.1
<i>Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure/celebrity or star?</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Yes, and I follow it	34.6	37.6
Yes, but I don’t follow it	25.8	24.1
No	38.6	37.4
No answer	0.9	0.9

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

and TV programmes. On top of that, we asked respondents whether they had recently seen the political leader/star in person at a public event. In this case, a higher proportion of political fans report having seen their leader in person than star fans. The difference is over 3 percentage points. However, in the two fandoms, having more than half of the fans subsamples declaring to have been in the same “physical” place as their fan-object reveals that online engagement did not replace offline engagement, rather the two are in many cases complementary, not substitute (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2011). Further, this outcome is particularly interesting given that, for all the other questions regarding these forms of content consumption, it is star fans who exhibit higher percentages.

This demonstrates that politics, like other cultural domains involving fandom, remains rooted in offline experiences such as public events, which have not been displaced by mainstream media or online consumption but rather coexist alongside them. Thus, we can say that public events still represent an essential part of being engaged as a fan—particularly in the political sphere.

For the two fandoms, and besides the mentioned relevance of offline engagement for the political one, we notice the highest percentages for (i) following personal social media accounts/pages and (ii) for having recently read articles or watched TV programmes where the star’s private life was discussed; in both cases, the share of fans declaring of having “consumed” such content is slightly over two-thirds for the star fandom, and clearly over half for the political fandom. More star fans, than political leader ones, hence appear to consume celebrity-related content. Further, it is noteworthy that more than half of the star fandom subsample answered “Yes” to each category of celebrity-related content consumption, besides the case of social media accounts and pages dedicated to the celebrity or star, which are followed by the 37.6% of fans. Although this figure is as low as expected, it reveals a notable phenomenon affecting both domains studied to a similar extent. This practice does not involve social media accounts of political leaders or stars; instead, it involves following accounts *devoted to them*, which may constitute an expression of fandom in itself (Campus et al., 2025).

Around 60% of both groups of fans declare to know an account or social media page of this type. Thus, despite the underlined differences, there are aspects for which the worlds of political and star fans are clearly comparable.

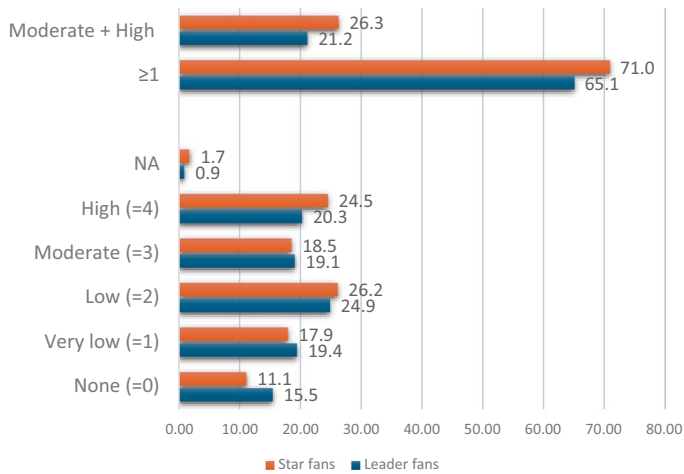


Fig. 4.1 Offline consumption index across leader and star fans. Percentages exhibited. (*Source:* Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

With the aim of proceeding with this comparison, we built an index, comprehensive of all the offline activities,⁵ whose percentages have been singularly reported in Table 4.4. With this comprehensive index, we want to analyse the level of this type of engagement across the two fandoms. We graphically report the results of this additive index in Fig. 4.1. In this figure, and across each of the two subsamples, we see the percentages for five levels of offline consumption—with those who did not answer included, they represent the totality of each fandom subsample—and from none up to all the four selected forms of engagement: reading articles/watching TV programmes where the leader/star’s private life is discussed; reading general articles about them; reading an (auto)biography; having seen this person live at a public event. Further, we provide the reader with a comparison of the “active” fans, namely those who were involved in at least one form of consumption, as well as a comparison of the “very active” fans, namely those who were involved in at least three out of the four consumption types. From an overall analysis of the results, we can draw three main conclusions: (1) in both families of fans, respondents are more likely to consume the politician or celebrity-related content than not; (2) net of

⁵ It is important to note that, even if we describe this index as an offline one, given that it involves activities that do not necessarily need access to the internet, some of these forms of consumption (e.g. reading news articles) can and do often happen online.

the different composition of the two fandoms, the star fandom holds an overall higher degree of engagement, which could be also the result of a higher availability and easier accessibility of star-related content to “consume” than the politician-related one; (3) without disregarding the extent to which the second conclusion is true, the distribution of engagement across the two groups appears to be very similar, which, once again, reveals elements of overlap regarding the characterisation of the two groups of fans and similar mechanisms operating within them.

A dimension not yet investigated in this contribution is that of “community”, which the scholarship presents as a key element of fandom (Dean, 2017). While we do not directly test to what extent political and star fans are part of a specific community, we analyse the extent to which they are inclined to be part of a community—or, at least, to engage with followers of the same person they are fans of. Namely, we asked the interviewees if they like talking to other people who admire the political leader or celebrity as much as they do, and to choose a category in a 0–10 scale of self-assessed identification with that sentence from “Not at all” (=0) to “Completely” (=10). We report our findings in Fig. 4.2.

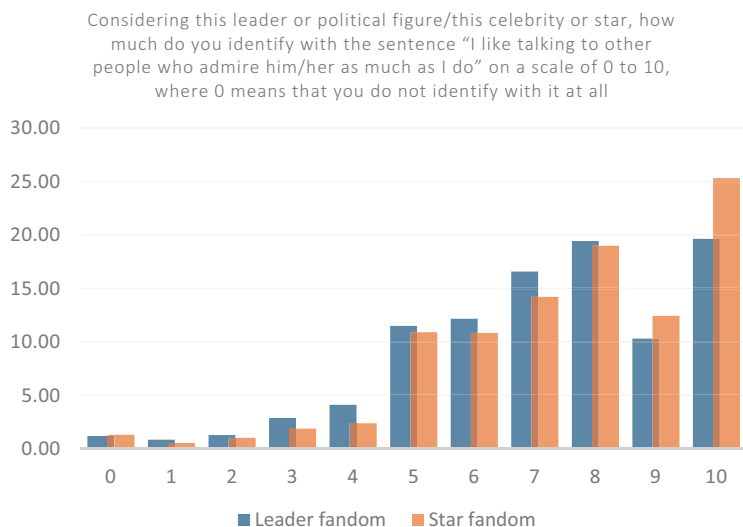


Fig. 4.2 Propensity towards a community across leader and star fandoms at each level of a 0–10 scale. Percentages exhibited. (*Source:* Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

Results confirm that being a fan typically entails a willingness to be part of a community of peers of like-minded followers, with the upper categories being chosen more frequently than the lower ones. Sharing admiration and connecting with other admirers thus appear as a fundamental rather than an ancillary part of the being-a-fan experience. With regard to the comparison across the two fandoms, while exhibiting a strikingly similar distribution in the two scales, fans of a celebrity from sports or popular culture have a higher propensity towards a fandom community than political leaders' fans. Regarding the latter group, 78.1% assign a score of agreement of 6 or above, while 81.8% of star fans do likewise. One explanation for this discrepancy—which nevertheless falls barely outside the margin of error—might be that politics, more than sport, art or entertainment, entails higher social costs associated with public engagement (Paler et al., 2018), which can result in a higher discretion. Expressing enthusiasm for a political leader is indeed more likely to be met with social disapproval and negative spillover effects within one's social networks. This may lead political fans to exercise greater caution than star ones—not because their desire for community is inherently weaker, but because the perceived risks of expressing political preferences remain salient even in like-minded settings.

4.5 COMPARING FANDOM PROFILES

Following the comparative description of the two fandoms presented above (leader and star fandoms), we now address their socio-demographic composition, specifically analysing the traits that are associated with the individual inclusion in one of the two groups. To this aim, we run two regression logit models, with belonging to the fandom (a dichotomous variable with 0 = No and 1 = Yes) as dependent variable (Tables 4.5 and 4.6). The independent variables function both as possible predictors, which we inductively take into consideration and test, and control variables isolating the effect of the other factors.

The socio-demographic independent variables are the following:

- *Gender*, with “Male” as reference category (=0) and “Female” (=1);
- *Age class*, a discrete five-level variable recoded from the declared age at the time of the interview, with the younger cohort—starting from 18 years old, the age of majority in the countries of our sample—as reference category (18–29 = 0);

Table 4.5 Logit regression model (DV: Political leader fandom)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female (ref.: male)	−0.332***	0.091	0.000
Age class (ref: 18–29)			
30–44	−0.088	0.159	0.578
45–54	−0.255	0.154	0.098
55–65	−0.321*	0.157	0.042
65+	−0.082	0.148	0.578
Education level (ref: Low)			
Middle	0.039	0.110	0.724
High	−0.160	0.130	0.217
News source (ref: TV news)			
Newspaper websites/apps	−0.008	0.126	0.951
Social media	0.086	0.141	0.539
Print newspapers	0.178	0.148	0.229
Radio	0.182	0.139	0.190
Podcasts	0.379†	0.225	0.093
News avoidance	−0.672*	0.332	0.043
Political interest (ref: Not interested)	1.208***	0.154	0.000
Political orientation (ref: Centre)			
Left	0.604***	0.142	0.000
Centre-Left	0.231	0.151	0.127
Centre-Right	0.547***	0.149	0.000
Right	1.274***	0.148	0.000
External/None	−1.028***	0.207	0.000
Country (ref: France)			
Bulgaria	−0.296	0.198	0.135
Germany	−1.605***	0.184	0.000
Spain	0.136	0.150	0.365
Italy	0.075	0.139	0.590
Poland	0.342*	0.166	0.039
UK	−0.538**	0.171	0.002
<i>Constant</i>	−1.615***	0.279	0.000

$N = 6900$; $\chi^2(25) = 591.03$, $p = 0.000$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.1748$

Note. Logistic regression with robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

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

- *Education level*, a discrete three-level variable, with “Low”, the reference category (=0), including respondents with no education or holding up to the lower secondary diploma, and with the highest category, “High” (=2), consisting of those with a tertiary education.

Table 4.6 Logit regression model (DV: Star fandom)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female (ref.: male)	−0.079	0.074	0.290
Age (ref: 18–29)			
30–44	−0.355**	0.121	0.003
45–54	−0.594***	0.126	0.000
55–65	−0.718***	0.138	0.000
65+	−0.751***	0.127	0.000
Education level (ref: Low)			
Middle	−0.025	0.094	0.791
High	−0.177†	0.103	0.086
News source (ref: TV news)			
Newspaper websites/apps	0.043	0.107	0.690
Social media	0.193†	0.111	0.082
Print newspapers	0.062	0.140	0.656
Radio	0.012	0.127	0.923
Podcasts	−0.001	0.189	0.995
News avoidance	−0.384	0.254	0.130
Political interest (ref: Not interested)	0.530***	0.094	0.000
Political orientation (ref: Centre)			
Left	−0.113	0.128	0.377
Centre-Left	−0.095	0.126	0.451
Centre-Right	−0.104	0.129	0.421
Right	0.224†	0.123	0.069
External/None	−0.513***	0.142	0.000
Country (ref: France)			
Bulgaria	0.507***	0.144	0.000
Germany	−0.315*	0.137	0.022
Spain	0.888***	0.117	0.000
Italy	0.550***	0.114	0.000
Poland	0.320*	0.140	0.023
UK	0.289*	0.135	0.032
<i>Constant</i>	−0.698**	0.218	0.001

$N = 6900$; $\chi^2(25) = 276.30$, $p = 0.000$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0587$

Note. Logistic regression with robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

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

The other independent variables considered are:

- *Most used media*, which identifies the respondents' first choice⁶ to the question "To keep up-to-date, what media have you most frequently used recently?", with "Television: newscasts or talk shows" as reference category (=0) and the other response options including "Websites or apps of daily newspapers or news magazines", "Social media, such as Facebook-Meta, X-Twitter, Instagram or others", "Daily printed newspapers or printed magazines", "Radio news programs", "News podcasts", and a last option indicating respondents that mostly try not to follow news and avoid keeping up to date;
- *Political interest*, a four-level variable recoded into a dichotomous one, so that those "Not very interested" in politics are grouped with those "Not at all interested" and form the reference category (Not interested in politics = 0), while the other category is formed by grouping those who answered "Somewhat" or "Very" (Interested in politics = 1);
- *Political orientation*, a categorical variable recoded, from the 0–10 scale traditionally used to measure the self-assessed left-right orientation moving upwards from left to Right, into six categories, "Left" (0–2 = 1), "Centre-Left" (3–4 = 2), "Centre" (5 = 3), "Centre-Right" (6/7 = 4), "Right" (8/10 = 5), and with "External" (=6) in a different category, which jointly includes those who refused to answer and those who declare not to recognise their orientation into this scale.

All the independent variables in the model were coded as categorical ones. On top of those mentioned above, both models included country fixed effects. Figure 4.3 presents the results of the two regression models (see Tables 4.5 and 4.6)—in teal, those referring to the leader fandom model, in orange those to the star fandom one—by exhibiting the point and interval estimates of the independent variables' coefficients. We depict coefficient estimates with a *p*-value lower than 0.01 with a darker shade, while those with a higher *p*-value appear with a lighted shade.

⁶ Respondents *could* (but *did not have to*) select up to two options, but they had to rank them for "importance". Therefore, we consider the first choice as the most important media used by respondents to keep up to date with news.

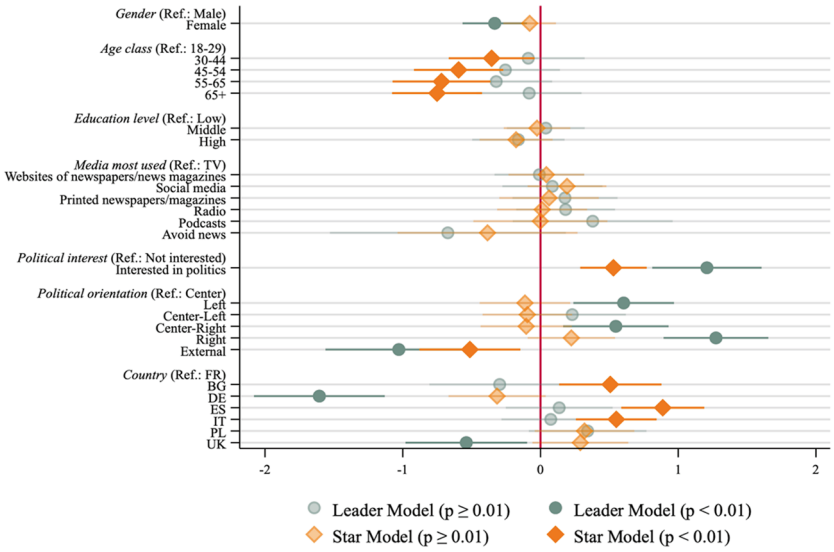


Fig. 4.3 Coefficient plot logit regression models (political fandom vs. star fandom). (*Source*: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

We now turn to the interpretation of the results. Despite some similarities and the overlap previously discussed in Sect. 3 of this chapter, and despite both being forms of parasocial attachment, the two parallel logit regression models show that the political leader fandom and the star fandom are associated with different socio-demographic and attitudinal factors. First, regarding gender: holding the other factors constant, we do not find an actual gender gap in the star fandom, while identifying as “female” significantly reduces the probability of belonging to political leader fandoms. Thus, on the one hand, the phenomenon of fandom itself exhibits gendered differentiation that has been observed in other domains of political life (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021)—such a disparity in relation to fandom engagement will be further analysed in Chap. 5. On the other hand, this does not extend to fandoms of famous personalities in sports, music, show business, cinema, etc., which are just as likely to be characterised by a more balanced “male” and “female” presence.

Differences can also be detected in the age class composition of the two fandoms. In this case, it is the political leader fandom exhibiting no significant association with any of the age classes compared to the younger

cohort (18–29). Conversely, we find the expected pattern of a linear decline in the probability of belonging to the star fandom as age increases, relative to respondents under 30 years old.

However, neither of the two fandoms is particularly characterised by fans with a high or low level of education. This is particularly striking when considering that, in other forms of political participation, such as voting, the education gap is persistent and perhaps even growing, where the turnout rate is diminishing (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017). Yet, political fandom communities do not respond to similar mechanisms, and the celebrity appeal of political leaders invests the electorate regardless of people's level of education. Similarly, star fandoms do not specifically pertain to the “uneducated” or “educated” ones in society.

Perhaps surprisingly, another similarity lies in the fact that political interest is significantly and positively associated with being part of a political leader fandom, but also of a star fandom. Overall, this is an important finding that shows again another perspective from which we note an—although partial—overlap. However, the effect of political interest as a predictor of belonging to a fandom appears to be much stronger for the political leader. Further, it is not only interest in politics in itself that raises the chances of being a political fan, but also the individual ideological positioning. The self-positioning on the left vs. right scale indeed reveals that holding a specific political orientation heightens the probability of belonging to a political leader fandom. In particular, this is true for those who position themselves at the margins of the political *continuum* from “left” to “right”, compared to those belonging to the “centre” of the political spectrum; on top of that, such effect is remarkably stronger for those on the “right”, who, when compared to centrists, are more than two times more likely to be fans of a political leader than those on the “left”. The latter hold the same probability of being part of a fandom as those on the “centre-right”. Even if, analysing the star fandom, we do not detect a similar pattern—with no specific political orientation playing a role in this case—for both fandoms, we find a negative association with falling into the category of those “External” to the political spectrum.⁷ While the star fandom appears ideologically neutral, it is—much like political fandom—clearly characterised by fans who do hold a political

⁷This category includes those who openly refuse to position themselves in the left vs. right scale and those who did not answer the question; together, these two groups constitute approximately 16% of the unweighted overall sample.

orientation, regardless of its specific nature. The rejection of the conventional spectrum left vs. right, on top of political disinterest, indicates a likely parallel rejection of developing fan-like relationships with public figures, regardless of whether they pertain to the political domain or the world of culture, entertainment, sport, etc. Yet, the culture of political fandoms is not merely an attachment to a general (and politically neutral or politically miscellaneous) fandom culture; instead, it is integrated into ideologically conditioned views, especially (but not exclusively) into right-wing ones. Even if we observe unpolitical fandoms inspiring or acting as a springboard for political engagement—in line with Hinck's (2019) findings—this terrain proves to be characterised by distinct dynamics involving political orientations as such, and with some being more prominent than others.

Now let us go back to the cross-country variation with regard to the probability of belonging to the two studied fandoms, which was already investigated in Sects. 2 and 3. With respect to France—selected as the reference category owing to its median level of political fans—there is a higher probability of belonging to a political leader fandom in Poland and a lower one in Germany and the UK, with no other significant differences. The star fandom presents a different picture: while, compared with France,⁸ Poland maintains a positive relationship—exhibiting a strong fandom culture across domains—and Germany maintains a negative one—exhibiting low fan-like engagement—the UK flips sign. Furthermore, while Bulgaria, Italy, and particularly Spain did not present significant differences with France in relation to political fandom, they exhibit a positive relationship with star fandom compared with France. This indicates that respondents from Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain are more likely to belong to the celebrity fandom.

Finally, it is worth mentioning model fits measures,⁹ for which we note that, *ceteris paribus*, the leader fandom model has a better fit than the star fandom one. This means that, regardless of individual coefficient

⁸ Whilst France holds the median percentage for political fandom, it holds the second-to-last percentage for star fandom, after Germany. To facilitate comparisons, France was maintained as the reference category across both models; however, its different positioning across the two fandoms must be considered when interpreting results.

⁹ In particular, the McFadden R^2 , often identified as a Pseudo R^2 measure, given that it recalls the 0–1 scale of R^2 applied to linear regression models. While in logit regression models we cannot directly calculate through this measure, the percentage of variance explained, higher values mean a better model fit.

significance, the star fandom appears to be a less predictable phenomenon, less adequately captured by the chosen explanatory variables. Conversely, the leader fandom phenomenon is more clearly outlined by the variables included in the model. This could be attributed also to the inclusion in the model of political attitudes, such as political interest and left–right self-placement.

4.6 CONCLUSIONS

The key question framing this chapter—*Fans Will Be Fans?*—carries an implicit hypothesis: that being-a-fan operates as a generalised latent disposition, an attitude that can travel across domains and manifests similarly whether the object of affect is a renowned sporting figure, a star of music or cinema, or a political leader. Aiming to answer our initial question, we operationalised “leader fandom” and “star fandom” through comparable measures of affectivity, disaggregated into the two key dimensions of closeness and emotionality; we then analysed these measures using original survey data across seven European democracies.

First, we do find an overlap between the two groups of fans: those who hold affective bonds with (non-political) celebrities are likely to do so with political leaders as well, and this correlation holds across all seven countries. The *total fans*, namely those invested in both spheres, represent a non-negligible segment of our studied population (14%) and exactly one-third of the overall fandom subsample. This suggests that something like a fan disposition does exist: a readiness to engage in parasocial relationships, to invest emotionally in public figures, regardless of the domain in which the latter operate. Even regarding consumption patterns, the fans in the two domains behave similarly, notwithstanding some distinctions and generally higher levels of mediated consumption in the star fandom. Yet, political fans more frequently report having seen the leader they refer to in person at public events. Offline engagement remains a distinctive feature of political fandom, and the digital transformation has not entirely replaced but rather complemented traditional forms of political engagement. The propensity towards forming a community of like-minded fans follows similar distributions, although star fans display a slightly higher willingness to connect with one another, possibly due to the lower social costs associated with publicly declaring admiration for non-political figures.

The most important difference lies in *why fans like* the objects of their affectivity. Star fandoms focus on the “extraordinary”: fans are drawn to

authenticity and uniqueness, to figures who stand apart. Political fandom, by contrast, while incorporating celebrity-related dynamics, revolves primarily around a logic of representation: citizens like leaders for understanding their problems, for sharing their vision, for competence in addressing their concerns. They do not require extraordinariness, but rather concreteness; the leader need not save the country but must be *responsive*; and their likability ranks last among the selected options.

Given these results, we can conclude that the political domain has not simply been colonised by entertainment logic. Rather, it has developed its own form of fandom—a fandom that remains ideologically conditioned (with right-wing citizens more likely to identify as political fans), more male-oriented (reproducing the persistent gender gap in certain forms of political engagement), and age-neutral (unlike star fandom, which steadily declines with age). These patterns indicate that political fandom is not merely a spillover from popular culture, but a phenomenon shaped by the specific features of democratic political life: the logic of representation, inequality of participation, costs of public commitment, and ideology. Nevertheless, it is interesting to highlight the similar role of political alienation: those who refuse to position themselves on the left–right spectrum are less likely to belong to *either* fandom. Regardless of the domain, a capacity for fan-like engagement may require a minimal degree of integration into shared frameworks of meaning. The alienated and disengaged do not simply redirect their affective energies from politics to entertainment; they appear to withdraw from parasocial investment altogether.

What, then, is the answer to our opening question? Fans will be fans, yes. But not in the way the question implies. The predisposition to fandom is there, but it does not imply a *mechanical* and equal engagement across domains, nor does it cancel the inherent differences between them. Political fandom borrows some attributes from celebrity culture while remaining attached to specific political dynamics. Fans-citizens approach politics also on its own terms; they seek someone competent and capable alongside a promise of being understood and represented.

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