

**The Commodification Of Reputation and Fame:**

**A Celebrity Surrogacy Research Proposal**

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## *Intro*

Surrogacy, as defined in campaigns, are “individuals who speak on behalf of a candidate or party during an election campaign, representing their views and promoting their platform”. Campaign surrogacy began early in the American experiment, and was used from the Gilded Age in the past, until now.<sup>1</sup> The premise of campaign surrogacy was to have a candidate's presence as far as possible, because the candidate could only do so much and travel so far. Surrogacy, in the modern day, is still used to help increase exposure and influence voters, particularly among younger or disengaged voters. The idea is that a celebrity or other political figure that someone may enjoy or trust, campaigns for a different politician (called a principal in political campaigns). Surrogacy is different from endorsement. Endorsement is voicing support, and just that, while surrogacy is campaigning for the candidate, by oneself, or in tandem with the principal. Examples of endorsements in the 2024 presidential election would be Taylor Swift, announcing support for former Vice President Harris in an instagram post, and on the Trump campaign, celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, who voiced support, but were not a part of the campaign. Surrogates would be people like RFK Jr, former President Obama, John Legend, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Kid Rock, who all appeared at, or ran campaign-stop events alone. Clearly, the use of campaign surrogates was extreme this past election cycle which led to the question of the effectiveness of surrogates, and particularly celebrity surrogates, as there was both a noticeable increase of celebrities in elections, and talk about celebrity surrogacy in elections, at least, admittedly, in my social circles and online space. The main research question asks if celebrity surrogates are effective promotion tools in elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Nora Kelly Lee, “Why Do Campaigns Use Surrogates?,” The Atlantic (blog), May 24, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/surrogates-clinton-trump-sanders/484031/>.

In terms of research, as covered later in this paper, there is a significant lack of work on celebrity surrogacy in particular, but studies covering celebrity endorsements, and political surrogacy have been done. This study would aim to fill those evident gaps in research.

As later described in this proposal, the method done in this study would first have an exploratory focus group to determine the appropriate questions, and if it were worth studying, and a following randomized survey experiment, probably not a 2x2 design, but a survey, designed to find some quantitative data, about opinions regarding celebrity surrogacy in elections.

The hypothesis proposed in the study is as follows:

Q: Did celebrity surrogates have an influence on young voters' (18-24) candidate opinions in the 2024 presidential election?

H (Directional Hypothesis): Celebrity surrogates positively influence young voters' candidate opinions on partisan lines, reinforcing established biases.

H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis): Celebrity surrogates had no significant influence on young voters' candidate opinions.

This paper will walk through the hypothesis, a literature review of past related work, on celebrity endorsements and political surrogacy, outlining gaps in research. I will eventually propose a mixed methods (focus group and survey) approach to testing these hypotheses.

### ***Literature review***

The research for this literature review revolves around celebrity surrogates in presidential campaigns. The intent was to focus on celebrity surrogates in campaigns, but the literature more broadly covers political surrogacy and celebrity endorsements in media. The research was done

for a hypothesis that asks if celebrity surrogates have an influence on young voters' (18-24) candidate opinions in the 2024 presidential election.

Celebrities are used in media for commercial purposes, commodifying reputation. In political campaigns, they attempt to function similarly but do not achieve the same effect. The articles cover celebrities' effects on voter intention and affect discourse. The main questions that arise in the review are concerning whether they do, and if so how endorsements shape political attitudes. Do scandals, credibility, and political salience shape the effects of endorsements, and if so, how? Does social media amplify or weaken celebrity influence in politics? The research carries several similar themes and intra-citations, and come from a vast majority of disciplines from marketing to 'celebrity studies'.

### ***Celebrity endorsements and voting behavior***

The research has found that celebrity endorsements have a limited direct impact on first person voter behavior. Endorsements may attract attention and influence some opinions, but they do not directly translate to votes as campaigns might hope. Veer, Becirovic, and Martin find that while celebrity endorsements attract attention, they do not inherently increase voter intention. Though their study was conducted in the UK, its findings likely apply elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Two studies found that though in some cases, celebrities may seem more trustworthy than politicians or non-celebrity influences, and family and friends are more likely to be trusted as political

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<sup>2</sup> Veer, Becirovic and Martin, "If Kate Voted Conservative". Christian Von Sikorski, Johannes Knoll, and Jörg Matthes, "A New Look at Celebrity Endorsements in Politics: Investigating the Impact of Scandalous Celebrity Endorsers and Politicians' Best Responses," *Media Psychology* 21, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 403–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1378109>.

influence overall.<sup>3</sup> In the 2008 election, Oprah's endorsement of Obama increased campaign donations and turnout but did not improve candidate favorability.<sup>4</sup>

There was also a visible manner in which political engagement moderates endorsement effects. In O'Regan's case, there was a statistically significant difference in AAPI and Hispanic voters, where they are more likely to trust politicians over family.<sup>5</sup> This comes with the theory that "first-generation college students may not consider their parents as politically knowledgeable due to their parents' lack of a college education".<sup>6</sup> Politically disengaged (low-salience) voters are more susceptible to celebrity influence, while highly engaged (high-salience) voters are less affected.<sup>7</sup> Celebrity endorsements are used as shortcuts for low-information voters.<sup>8</sup> Across the studies, it's found that though celebrities or politicians; can increase attention, or increase trust in politicians, but not any emphasis on output in actual votes.

### ***Social Media and Celebrity Influence***

Social media is a tool for communication, and political communication all the same- a place where people are both consumers and producers. A hypothesis in Zelinsky's findings and others was that political content on social media, particularly Twitter, would receive less engagement than entertainment content. However, this was not the case. Political content got either a negligible amount less, or sometimes more interaction.<sup>9</sup> Similarly it was expected that, like other forms of political media, negative posted content would receive more interaction. It

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<sup>3</sup> Valerie R. O'Regan, "The Celebrity Influence: Do People Really Care What They Think?," *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 469–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.925408>; Veer, Becirovic and Martin, "If Kate Voted Conservative".

<sup>4</sup>O'Regan, "The Celebrity Influence".

<sup>5</sup>O'Regan, "The Celebrity Influence".

<sup>6</sup>O'Regan, "The Celebrity Influence".

<sup>7</sup> Veer, Becirovic and Martin, "If Kate Voted Conservative".

<sup>8</sup> Veer, Becirovic and Martin, "If Kate Voted Conservative".; Nisbett and DeWalt, "Exploring the Influence".

<sup>9</sup> Jan Zilinsky et al., "Don't Republicans Tweet Too? Using Twitter to Assess the Consequences of Political Endorsements by Celebrities," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 1 (March 2020): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719002603>;

was thought that if it received more interaction, it would be posted more because in traditional media, negative information is more likely to be paid attention to, processed centrally, and subsequently remembered, so It would theoretically benefit to post a smear campaign.<sup>10</sup> The information was again, not statistically significant to support these hypotheses about interactions or posting, in fact they argue it may be the opposite.<sup>11</sup> In this more recent research, a question of things in 2016 changed significantly and unexpectedly in regards to social media and content about Donald Trump, who posts a significant amount, both positive and negative . This leads to further questions of the way media and campaigns are run and how they are changing, if the current strategies are effective, or are any strategies effective at all?

The abundance of information on social media manifests in two ways: overwhelming and educational. In Nisbett and DeWalt's paper, social media abundance leads to campaigns thinking they are doing a lot, being cutting edge, and hip but it may not have the impact they intend - social media was seeming like "a glut of political chatter [...], making it hard to cut through the clutter." overwhelming and confusing media consumers.<sup>12</sup> Zilinsky et al. argue an opposite approach, they say increased campaign information raises the likelihood that non-political actors would encounter and engage with political content, increasing their political knowledge and saliency; especially for less active voters. Interestingly if using this with Veer, Becirovic and Martin's study, which argues Low-salience voters are more influenced by celebrity endorsements High-salience voters prefer non-celebrity endorsers and focus more on issue-based cues, then the whole thing is circular. A formerly low-salience voter, after spending time on social media, and accidentally consuming political content, might result in a more in-tune

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<sup>10</sup> Zilinsky et al., "Don't Republicans Tweet Too?"

<sup>11</sup> Zilinsky et al., "Don't Republicans Tweet Too?"

<sup>12</sup> Gwendelyn S. Nisbett and Christina Childs DeWalt, "Exploring the Influence of Celebrities in Politics: A Focus Group Study of Young Voters," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 24, no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 144–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2016.1184664>;

participant, who would go from susceptible to celebrity and media influence, to consuming it, and due to that consumption being more salient and less moved by celebrity endorsements.<sup>13</sup>

This might result in a claim that celebrity endorsements may work, but maybe only once.

In the 2024 election, there was a surge of “micro-influencers” (social media content creators with follower counts typically ranging from 10,000 to 100,000) working with the Harris campaign. The over saturation incited questions about their actual impact. These micro-influencer, (and traditional influencer partnerships with people who may be considered genuinely famous from social media influence) were used both as endorsements, but also surrogates, creating paid, or unpaid campaign materials on behalf of the Harris campaign. With thousands of ‘boots on the ground’ acting as miniature surrogates, It makes the need to study the impact greater.

### ***Celebrity Credibility and Risk***

In any circumstance, Entrusting credibility to others carries inherent risks and challenges. The same is seen in celebrity endorsements and surrogacy. The literature shows that not all celebrities are perceived equally; in elections, credibility matters more than fame.<sup>14</sup> Celebrities must be seen as knowledgeable to have political influence.<sup>15</sup> Congruence between a celebrity and the issue determines effectiveness – like how Eva Longoria was seen as credible on immigration but not on finance.<sup>16</sup> The opposite is also true, as seen in Sean P. “Diddy” Combs’ *Vote or Die* campaign (a campaign to get youth and minorities voting) . Celebrities perceived as lacking credibility, such as Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton, were less effective in mobilizing students and viewers, who were less inclined to support the movement.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Zilinsky et al., “Don’t Republicans Tweet Too?”; Veer, Becirovic and Martin, “If Kate Voted Conservative”.

<sup>14</sup> Nisbett and DeWalt, “Exploring the Influence”.

<sup>15</sup> O’Regan, “The Celebrity Influence”; Nisbett and DeWalt, “Exploring the Influence” .

<sup>16</sup> Nisbett and DeWalt, “Exploring the Influence”.

<sup>17</sup> Nisbett and DeWalt, “Exploring the Influence”.

As previously noted in discussions of Diddy and voting efforts, endorsements carry risk. A candidate cannot always predict a celebrity's actions, past or future – an issue that makes the inclusion of Sean Combs in Nisbett and DeWalt's paper on youth voter turnout both unavoidable and uniquely challenging. This makes even referencing him, in tandem with your voter turnout, seem weird, directly showing the risks of celebrity impact on campaigns, they could end up like *Vote or Die*. While mostly seen in Von Sikorski, Knoll and Matthes' work but also touched on in Devine and Weinschenk's paper as well, harmful endorsements at the moment, or down the line are likely and all too real.<sup>18</sup> A controlled survey found that a celebrity's personal misbehavior can damage an endorsed politician. If the endorsement was politician-initiated, voters held the politician more responsible for the endorser's actions.<sup>19</sup> In the case that it happened, and was self initiated he also found that a “denouncing response reinforced the fact that the politician initiated and was in control of the endorsement”, tying them more closely.<sup>20</sup> They find that might be beneficial to address scandals, if the endorsement was not politician- initiated.<sup>21</sup> Though with this, a difference between pity and anger arose, pity was a sign of more positive influence, and anger negative in regards to related scandals.<sup>22</sup> Divine touches on the risk of Bill Clinton's surrogacy for his wife, Hillary Clinton due to the linkage of his sexual misconduct and policies that were gathering in unpopularity.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Celebrity Surrogacy vs Traditional Figures***

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher J. Devine and Aaron C. Weinschenk, “Surrogate-in-Chief: Did Bill Clinton's Campaign Visits Help (or Hurt) Hillary Clinton in 2016?,” *The Forum* 18, no. 2 (October 23, 2020): 177–95, <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2020-2002>;

<sup>19</sup> Von Sikorski, Knoll, Matthes “A New Look”.

<sup>20</sup> Von Sikorski, Knoll, Matthes “A New Look”.

<sup>21</sup> Von Sikorski, Knoll, Matthes “A New Look”.

<sup>22</sup> Von Sikorski, Knoll, Matthes “A New Look”.

<sup>23</sup> Devine and Weinschenk, “Surrogate-in-Chief”.



The unstudied intersection of celebrity surrogacy, beyond simple endorsements but distinct from traditional political surrogacy, presents a need to identify key differences. In an overview of Bill Clinton's surrogacy, Devine finds spouses, former presidents, and political elites often hold more credibility than celebrities.<sup>24</sup> But even with the increase in credibility, Bill's presentation on the campaign trail had a mixed effect, boosting in some occasions and hurting it in others.<sup>25</sup> He argues that celebrity surrogates like Beyoncé and Jay-Z may mobilize young voters, but their long-term impact remains unclear.

### ***Key Takeaways***

After thorough review, a few takeaways are made. The first; is that celebrity impact is most influential in disengaged voters, and that overall, friends and family had a higher impact on opinion. The second being Social media can amplify celebrity influence, and political knowledge but over-saturation of content can limit impact, and over consumption of influence could have marginal return rates. Risks in endorsements are high, from people not listening to incredible celebrities and, the possibility of scandals erasing benefits of an endorsement and even hurting the politician involved.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Gaps in literature***

After thorough review, especially in terms of my research question and hypothesis; asking Did celebrity surrogates have an influence on young voters' (18-24) candidate opinions in the 2024 presidential election, and furthering it, raising questions if it increases along party lines. The first is acknowledging the research gap that exists between celebrity endorsements and political surrogacy, and that most background knowledge will need to come from between the

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<sup>24</sup> Devine and Weinschenk, "Surrogate-in-Chief".

<sup>25</sup> Devine and Weinschenk, "Surrogate-in-Chief".

<sup>26</sup> Nisbett and DeWalt, "Exploring the Influence", Devine and Weinschenk, "Surrogate-in-Chief".

two. The second is this changing and more intense political environment in the US, as mentioned in the Zilinsky et al. article, but furthering since then. Combining political psychology, some of these periods research and their methods will hopefully allow for a project able to answer these questions.

Further questions came up as well, when looking at responsibility in scandals, I now question whether there is a relationship between that and if audiences perceive celebrities endorsement or surrogacy as a choice, a donation or an act of their will, or, as a commodification of their reputation and paid advertisements - and if that changes perception or views. As previously mentioned, from the 2024 campaign, a question of flooding the market with influencers, both large and small and what the perceived effect on voters would be. More information leads to more questions and research directions. This review serves as a starting point for understanding the intersection of celebrity surrogacy and political influence. Since both political surrogates and celebrity endorsements have limited direct impact on voting, my research will focus on perception and general opinions rather than voter turnout. This suggests that a focus group or survey would be the most effective methodology.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

Finding gaps in literature review regarding and understanding the methodology has led to an understanding of what might be the best for the hypothesis. Due to the lack of direct data on celebrity endorsements, I think designing a matrix survey after working with a focus group, to understand the relationship before testing it would be ideal.

### ***Focus Groups***

If this were to continue into a real study, a focus group of most likely college students, but more importantly people ages 18- 24, would be conducted first. It would be run following Nisbett and DeWalt's ideas, but rather than using a thematic analysis, using their plan of questions: a demographics questionnaire, warm ups, the questions themselves but maybe not and a set of repeated follow up questions.<sup>27</sup> These qualitative questions would aim to help determine the celebrities, and politicians that would be options in the survey, to see who (across hopefully a diverse set of group participants, and controls for demographic otherwise) is relevant to the public. They would hope to determine also, if this is a viable case to study, if people even have interacted with or thought about celebrity or political surrogacy, and if so, what the general sentiments would be, and why. Some sample questions are as follows, after beginning with a demographic survey.

1. Did you vote in the 2024 presidential election
2. Why or why did you not vote, what were contributing factors
3. What campaign strategies do you remember the most from the 2024 presidential election
4. Did you notice any political figures or celebrities speaking on behalf of a political candidate? Who?
5. Have you ever changed your mind due to a politician's connection with another politician or a celebrity? If so, why and who was it?
6. Do you trust celebrities when it comes to politics, if not who do you trust?

After the focus group, a survey eventually would be administered

1. What party do you align with
  - a. (Democracy, Republican)

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<sup>27</sup> Nisbett and DeWalt, "Exploring the Influence".

2. Who besides the principals in an election (Presidential Candidate, VP Pick, and their partners or wives ), do you consider the next most influential individual who publicly speaks on behalf of a candidate (with options determined by the focus groups).

Depending on this answer, coding it by whether it was a celebrity or a political figure.

The name of the figure in question would be the topic of the text question.

3. What party does the [Celebrity/Politician] align with?
  - a. (Democracy, Republican)
4. How do you think [Celebrity/Politician] reflects on [Candidate ]
  - a. 1-7 Very Favorably to Very Unfavorably for all questions
5. What does [Candidate] being campaigned for by [Celebrity/Politician] make you feel about [Celebrity/Politician]
6. How do you view about [Candidate]
7. How do you view [Celebrity/Politician]
8. Did you think about [Celebrity/Politician] when voting for or against [Candidate]
9. Did [Celebrity/Politician] effect how you vote on [Candidate]
10. Did you vote for [Candidate]

This survey, again, would be administered to people ages (18-24), most likely college students, but hopefully non-students as well to make the study more generally applicable. This should help see comparative opinions between the principal and the surrogate, without having only self-report, and then have questions that follow with the same questions for other celebrities/politicians. Ideally, enough surveys would be completed to compare both same-party candidate and surrogate, and cross party candidate and surrogate. (I.e RFK Jr., Liz Cheney.) From the results of choices of politicians/celebrity surrogates we should be able to code the

results and be able to do statistical analysis and chi-squared, and t-tests on the data to see if there are any significant correlations between favorability, and also party lines. In this experiment, the independent variable would be the favorability of the surrogates and its projection onto the candidate ; and the dependent variable is the outcome on being perception of the candidate.

In addition, to compare and control for specific demographics, and other voting and media consumption habits there will be primer questions about these traits. These questions would be age, sex, race, sexuality, education level, Self identified political salience, past voting behavior and political engagement, social media and TV/Print/Online News engagement to gain background understanding, and to run crosstabs (a method of controlling for a variable while comparing two others) regarding the results and the status of other specifics demographics and habits.

If the focus group pushed the survey into a different, simpler pathway. A 2x2 matrix survey as seen in a significant amount of the literature review could be used. Surrogacy exposure vs non exposure, and voting for candidate or not voting control of party lines. Though it would produce much less information, it would be a more manageable experiment and still add to the research gap.

There are challenges tied with all surveys, even when comparative, they can be skewed by self reporting, Questions selected may not actually lead to the correct result, even if interpreting a manner that would be expected, even with statistical regression, and statistically significant results - the questions may not have external validity, though because there is not real-life data to compare to.

### ***Conclusion***

The proposed benefit of the study would be beneficial to both voters, political psychologists and campaigns. I can only assume hundreds of thousands, if not millions are spent either on ‘buying’ surrogates, or the materials to support surrogates on campaign stops, large events, feeding volunteers and paying employees at said events and publicity surrounding said events. This would become especially influential in campaigns if the weight negative of the association outweighs the weight of the positive ones benefits might have, even if it is depending on the person, but it could be an extreme waste of campaign resources if that is the case.

Some challenges in this study would be drawing quantitative data from qualitative questions, and especially with an inexperienced person in an under researched topic. The hope is to make it qualitatively sound, with phrasing the questions correctly and have them accurately correlate to results. Admittedly, a lot of this would be relying on me furthering my research methods, and beginning to fully understand how to both run a survey and code that.

As the topic has been not researched, there is a copious amount of research to keep doing. There are opportunities to do hyper specific campaign trial assessments of principals like in Devine and Weinschenk’s study, and in comparison to the spread of where other, political or celebrity surrogates travel, and trying to understand the location based benefits for surrogate stops, or a wider scale survey across america, on post election in tandem with actual election outcomes and not just perceived voter behavior, but realized behavior as well. If there is a true positive impact, then this study is just the tip of the iceberg, and it would be super imperative for campaign work to continue investigating.

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