Revisiting Celebrity Political Influence with Personalized Interventions[*]

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Abstract

Celebrities often use their platforms to speak on political matters. However, today's fragmented cultural environment means most celebrities' political engagement is noticed only by fans, not the general public. Indeed, research suggests fandom is a key condition for celebrity influence, but tests of this idea usually involve a single celebrity or fandom, lacking generalizability. To address this, we introduce an experimental design that personalizes celebrity influence interventions using the respondent's favorite celebrity. We apply this design in the context of candidate endorsements. We fail to find evidence suggesting endorsements by most-liked celebrities affect political outcomes. However, these endorsements increase fandom and trust in the celebrity's political opinions. Our design provides opportunity for more generalizable tests of celebrity political influence.

Keywords: Celebrity influence, Personalized intervention, Candidate endorsements

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1   Introduction

From candidate endorsements to advocacy on political and social issues, celebrities are often visible participants in political discourse today. However, it is no longer only the most widely-known (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Taylor Swift) or those who have made political activism a part of their brand (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio, Angelina Jolie) who use their platforms for public political engagement. Today, it is common for celebrities with narrower fanbases and from more niche corners of culture to speak out on political and social issues. And because the consumption of popular culture is increasingly personalized, with individuals selectively consuming content dictated by their interests (e.g., Holtz et al., 2020), we expect *fans*, not the general public, to consume the majority of celebrities' public political engagement. For example, a group of actors, musicians, and other artists launched the "Artists4Ceasefire" campaign in October 2023, advocating for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. While widely-known celebrities like Drake signed the organization's open letter (Trapunski, 2023), hundreds of artists with smaller, specific fanbases also signed the open letter and promoted their views at awards shows, on social media, and in interviews (*Artists4Ceasefire*, 2025; Sloss, 2024). Even if Drake's involvement with Artists4Ceasefire reached the general public, attention paid to the majority of other signatories was likely limited to their fans. For example, actresses Ayo Edebiri and Nicola Coughlan frequently share their views on the Israel-Gaza War, but without being household names, this activism is most likely to be heard among their specific fanbases. In this paper, we take seriously the democratization of celebrity political engagement and the highly personalized nature of the public's cultural consumption, and we revisit whether celebrities can influence political attitudes in the public.

As celebrities of all kinds speak out on politics, this represents a shift from a time characterized by monoculture, where a small number of celebrities commanded universal attention (Reynolds, 2019). Instead, just as the news environment is highly fragmented and people can be selective in the news outlets they consume (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2022), popular culture is highly fragmented and people can be selective in the cultural content they consume. Critically, this does not necessarily decrease the importance or influence of celebrities in Americans' lives. Americans may not be equally attentive to all celebrities, but they spend time, energy, and money consuming the professional outputs and personal lives of their favorite celebrities. Because people pay the most attention to and are most favorable toward celebrities of whom they

are fans, we argue that fandom is a key to understanding whether celebrities' public political engagement can shape political attitudes today.

Prior evidence on celebrity political influence is mixed. Some studies show celebrity endorsements of candidates and political statements can shape attitudes and behaviors, such as Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic primaries (Garthwaite and Moore, 2013; Pease and Brewer, 2008). However, some evidence suggests backlash from celebrity involvement in politics, particularly when the celebrity is not trusted or liked (Artime and Hershey, 2023; Frizzell, 2011; Jackson, 2018). Taken together, prior research demonstrates that celebrity influence is highly conditional. Not all celebrities are expected to have an effect on all people. How specific audience members view the celebrity is key. The literature points to not only familiarity with the celebrity, but perceptions of trustworthiness, favorability, and identification with the celebrity as important conditions for influence. Therefore, we expect that fans, as the group most likely to view the celebrity in these favorable terms, will be most likely to be affected by celebrities' public political engagement.

While prior research has pointed to fandom being an important moderator of celebrity political influence, the literature lacks a rigorous, generalizable test of this claim. Most prior studies experimentally assess the potential influence of a single celebrity among the general public (e.g. Artime and Hershey, 2023; Frizzell, 2011; Nownes, 2012, 2017), but it is often unclear how much of these samples would consider themselves fans of the celebrity in the experimental intervention. For effects to generalize beyond the study's sample, the sample should be one in which the celebrity's political engagement would be noticed in the real-world. Without studying influence among fans, small or null effects may be underestimating celebrity political influence. Other research examines specific celebrity-fan dynamics, finding important connections between celebrity-related events and political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Miller et al., 2020; Nisbett and Schartel Dunn, 2021; Rossiter and Harden, 2024; Towler et al., 2020). For example, Mohamed Salah, a Muslim soccer player, reduced Islamophobic attitudes and behaviors Liverpool F.C.'s fans after joining the team (Marble et al., 2021). However, because these studies focus on specific fandoms, it is unclear whether the evidence is generalizable to other celebrities, fandoms, events, and political attitudes.

Another approach is to examine the moderating effects of fandom, and similar constructs, on celebrity political influence (e.g. Jackson, 2018). For example, research shows that the approval of Colin Kaepernick's protests leads to more protest behavior among African Americans who

approved of his activism (Towler et al., 2020). However, because these moderators are not randomly assigned, it is difficult to know whether effects attributed to fandom are due to fandom itself or due to other differences among fans and non-fans.

We reinvestigate the question of celebrity influence by taking fandom seriously without sacrificing generalizability. To do so, we introduce an experimental design that better captures how celebrities' public political engagement operates in today's fragmented cultural environment. Our design avoids focusing on the potential influence of one celebrity among the general public. It also avoids focusing on a singular celebrity-fan dynamic or event. Instead, we use a two-wave design that uses an open-ended survey prompt to elicit each participant's most-liked celebrity in Wave 1. Then, Wave 2 randomly assigns whether the participant receives a personalized intervention, containing their most-liked celebrity, or not. This design allows us to estimate the average effect of celebrity political activity on their fans, which we argue is a more realistic and generalizable test of celebrity influence in contemporary politics.

In what follows, we use this design to reinvestigate celebrity influence in elections. We fielded a preregistered experiment in the lead-up to the 2024 United States Presidential Election between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris.[1] In Wave 1, we elicited participants' most-liked celebrity and preferred candidate. In Wave 2, we randomly assigned each participant to one of three conditions—an endorsement of their preferred candidate by their most-liked celebrity, an endorsement of their preferred candidate by a generic set of celebrities, or election content with no endorsement. Contrary to our expectations, we find no evidence to suggest that celebrity endorsements—whether tailored to include one's most-liked celebrity or not—affect favorability of one's preferred candidate, enthusiasm about voting, anxiety about voting, or likelihood of turning out. However, we also investigate a set of preregistered exploratory outcomes, finding that candidate endorsements by a most-liked celebrity caused an increase in identification as a fan and political trust in that celebrity. And both types of celebrity endorsements—personalized and non-personalized—caused a decrease in the perception that celebrity endorsements are gimmicks. This suggests that celebrity political involvement leads people to feel more connected to and trusting of the celebrities of whom they are fans. In other words, fans' parasocial bonds with celebrities are strengthened when celebrities engage in political activity that is aligned with their fans' political preferences, potentially laying important foundation for future political persuasion (Kim and Patterson Jr, 2025).

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[1]We preregistered our design at [link redacted for peer-review].

Our article makes three main contributions. First, we introduce an experimental design that personalizes experimental treatments using the specific celebrity of whom a participant would actually consider themselves a fan, improving the generalizability of estimates of celebrity influence on political attitudes and behaviors. Second, this design has promise to be useful for understanding celebrity political influence beyond presidential campaigns. It is likely that fans of a given celebrity are differentially exposed to and affected by the celebrity's messaging in their daily lives across a variety of issues and events, and this design can help estimate the aggregate political influence of celebrities regardless of the specific context. Our third contribution is new evidence that supports the idea that the involvement of celebrities in politics begets a feedback loop with their politically aligned fans. When celebrities advocate for shared political views, fans strengthen their fan identity and their trust in the celebrity when it comes to politics. This increased fandom and trust may lead fans to be more susceptible to future political influence by the celebrity.

2   Hearing Celebrities' Political Voices in a Fragmented Cultural Environment

Celebrity involvement in politics looks different today than just a few decades ago, when Meyer (1995) argued celebrities have limited standing in terms of the political and social issues they can comment on with legitimacy and effectiveness, and that celebrities are most likely to engage within this specific set of issues. Today, a wide range of celebrities use their platforms to publicly engage in a variety of political and social issues. For example, at least 40 celebrities performed or made appearances at rallies in support of the Harris presidential campaign in 2024, many with specific, narrower fanbases like Maggie Rogers, GloRilla, or Bon Iver (Stone, 2024). While attractive for campaign rallies, the celebrities involving themselves in politics extends well beyond musical artists, now including non-traditional celebrity figures like streamers (Harris et al., 2023) and influencers (Harff and Schmuck, 2025; Riedl et al., 2023). For example, in October 2020, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sought to mobilize votes for Democratic candidates in the upcoming election by streaming on Twitch with popular Twitch voices like "Pokimane" and "DrLupo," at one point reaching 430,000 concurrent viewers, largely drawn from these streamers' specific fanbases (Huddleston Jr., 2020). Celebrity political influence extends beyond electoral politics as well. As mentioned earlier, hundreds of performers signed

the Artists4Ceasefire open-letter, and celebrities have been heavily involved in movements such as Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, the #MeToo movement, GLAAD campaigns, Covid-19 vaccine campaigns, and Families Belong Together (Jackson et al., 2020).

While it is clear from previous research that celebrities are effective at using their public exposure to draw media attention to political issues they choose to comment on (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2016, 2019; Harvey, 2018), it is less clear which citizens hear which celebrity voices. Few celebrities command wide-spread attention (Jackson et al., 2025). Just as audiences tailor their news consumption to align with their preferences (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2022), people also gravitate toward cultural content that resonates with their tastes, interests, and identities. That there is *more*, highly-fragmented cultural content that people self-select into, coupled with more celebrities speaking out on politics, results in a highly diffuse pattern of potential celebrity influence for researchers to observe. We expect that today's cultural environment is one where each celebrity primarily reaches their specific audience; therefore, their influence may be more localized to their fans rather than shaping broad public opinion.

3   Key Conditions for Celebrity Influence

While celebrities' voices are increasingly shaping the political discourse their fans are consuming on important issues and elections, the question of celebrity political *influence* remains unclear. Celebrity endorsements of political statements often have null and negative effects when the celebrities are not viewed as trustworthy or credible when it comes to politics (Artime and Hershey, 2023; Frizzell, 2011; Jackson and Darrow, 2005). For example, experiments examining the effect of political statement endorsements by celebrities like Bono (Frizzell, 2011) and Benedict Cumberbatch (Artime and Hershey, 2023) found these celebrities had a negative effect on agreement with the statement relative to when traditional political actors endorsed the view. The authors speculate that the negative effects were likely driven by a lack of trust. This follows from research showing that celebrities, in general, are not viewed as more trustworthy or credible than traditional political actors when it comes to politics (Harvey, 2018), even among young people (O'Regan, 2014) and first-time voters (Wood and Herbst, 2007). Other studies fail to find a differential effect on candidate endorsements between high-credibility and low-credibility celebrities (Morin et al., 2012), which could suggest that credibility is not enough for celebrities to garner influence—an emotional connection may be needed as well.

Therefore, another common thread in the investigation of celebrity political influence is the extent to which an emotional connection with the celebrity is necessary for influence. Research has shown that familiarity with the celebrity is not a sufficient condition for influence (Jackson, 2018), suggesting a stronger connection is likely important for influence. Evidence for the importance of favorability (i.e., liking) of the celebrity is mixed, with some studies showing that high favorability of the celebrity making the political endorsement or statement increased their influence (Jackson, 2018; Nownes, 2021; Pease and Brewer, 2008), while other studies showing favorability did not lead to celebrity influence (Nownes, 2012).

However, studies that explicitly study *fans* of celebrities, the group with the strongest emotional connection with the celebrity, are most likely to find evidence of celebrity political influence. For example, Garthwaite and Moore (2013) examined Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic primaries using geographic variation in Winfrey's magazine sales and book subscriptions to measure her influence. In other words, they examine if areas with more fans (i.e., people who are willing to spend their time and money on her content) led to an increase in Obama's vote share, finding support for the influence of Winfrey's endorsement among fans. Moreover, personal identification with a celebrity is a common feature of fan-celebrity dynamics, and high identification has been shown to be a key moderator for influence (Nisbett and DeWalt, 2016; Um, 2018). Research also examines specific, and real, events in which celebrities involve themselves in politics, finding effects among their specific fandoms, such as Taylor Swift's first political endorsement in 2018 (Nisbett and Schartel Dunn, 2021). Finally, celebrities sometimes find themselves invoked in political or social discourse without actively seeking such a spotlight, yet these moments can still shape fans' political attitudes and behaviors, whose emotional attachment to the cultural component of the discourse amplifies the relevance of the political issue (Marble et al., 2021; Rossiter and Harden, 2024).

3.1 Expectations

We build on prior evidence that celebrity political influence is most likely to be observed among a celebrities' fans, and we specifically reexamine the effects of celebrity endorsements of presidential candidates. We expect that candidate endorsements from a person's most-liked celebrity will have stronger political influence than endorsements from other celebrities. We preregistered this general expectation in regard to four primary outcomes used in the celebrity endorsement literature—affect toward one's preferred candidate, enthusiasm about voting, anxiety about

voting, and likelihood of turning out—so that our findings speak closely to prior research. Our first expectation pertains to candidate evaluations. We expect that a most-liked celebrity's endorsement of a candidate should increase fans' positive affect toward that candidate, relative to endorsements from other celebrities. We also examine emotions pertaining to the act of voting (Nownes, 2017). We expect that when a most-liked celebrity makes an endorsement, it will increase enthusiasm and decrease anxiety about voting for the endorsed candidate, relative to endorsements from other celebrities. Finally, we are interested in behaviors taken to support the endorsed candidate. We expect that preferred candidate endorsements from most-liked celebrities will increase self-reported likelihood of voting for the candidate, relative to endorsements from other celebrities.

4 Limitations of Past Approaches to Studying Celebrity Influence

In this section, we outline the two main approaches used for estimating the effects of celebrity political engagement. The approaches are generally to (1) estimate the political influence of a single celebrity (or a few) that is (are) widely-known among the general public, or (2) estimate the political influence of a single celebrity specifically among their fans. We explain why both of these approaches have limited generalizability to understanding the effects of celebrity political engagement on political attitudes and behaviors. Then, in the section that follows, we introduce an experimental design that addresses this issue.

The first common approach to estimating the influence of celebrities on political attitudes and behaviors is to identify a specific celebrity and estimate their influence among the general public (e.g., Artime and Hershey, 2023; Frizzell, 2011; Jackson, 2018; Jackson et al., 2025; Morin et al., 2012; Nownes, 2012, 2017). This approach is usually experimental, and thus designed to estimate the average treatment effect of a given celebrity's political engagement. This approach has limited external validity for two main reasons. First, the experimental sample may contain only a small proportion of participants who are actually fans of that celebrity, yet fans are the people who are most likely to hear the political messaging and be susceptible to persuasion in the real-world. If the sample largely contains people who would not see the celebrity's political involvement when it occurs in the real-world, this design may underestimate the real-world effect of celebrity influence. Any small or null effects may be driven by the lack of fandom in
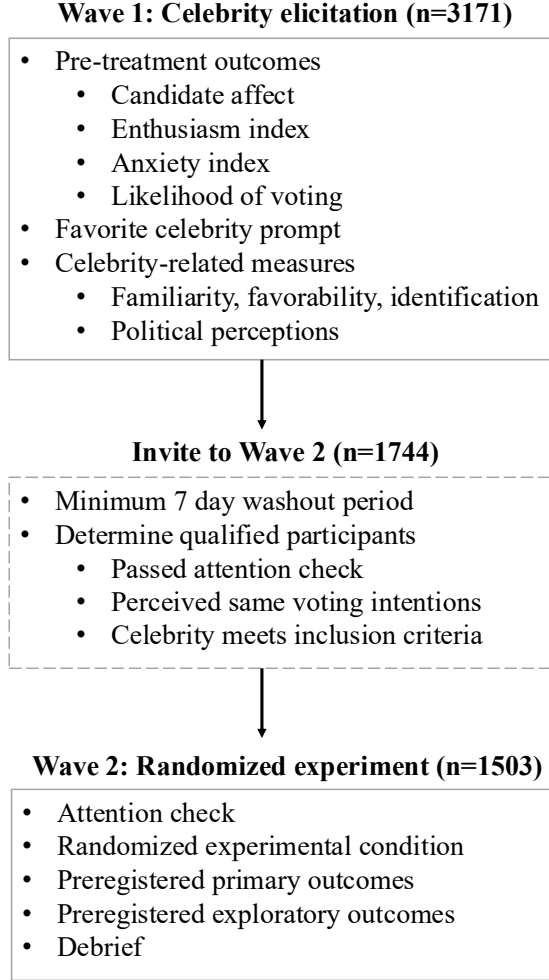
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the sample. A design that ensures participants are *fans* of the celebrity in the experimental intervention would be more generalizable to how celebrity political statements are consumed in the real world. Second, this design typically chooses a celebrity for the experimental intervention that has specific features, such as being widely-known, particularly palatable, and/or with a strong reputation as a political activist. For example, Frizzell (2011) studied the influence of Bono due to his history of political activism, but this limits the generalizability of this evidence to celebrities that may speak out on politics, but have not made it a part of their brand to do so. In general, the particular features often making a celebrity attractive for an experimental manipulation may not represent the breadth of celebrities speaking out in politics today. Extending the literature to a wider group of celebrities is important because more and more celebrities are speaking out on political and social issues. Political matters are no longer the domain of only a few high-profile celebrities with brands as political activists.

The second main approach is to estimate the political influence of a single celebrity among that celebrity's fans. This approach improves generalizability by focusing on the group the celebrity is most likely to influence in the real world. For example, Mohamed Salah's presence on the Liverpool F.C. roster, as a Muslim player, decreased anti-Muslim hate crimes and decreased anti-Muslim tweets, with generalizable effects to Muslims beyond Salah (Marble et al., 2021), specifically among the Liverpool town and fanbase. Moreover, Taylor Swift fans whose attempts to purchase highly-coveted concert tickets failed, and thus experienced the politics of economic fairness firsthand, showed attitudinal and behavioral differences toward related ticketing politics (Rossiter and Harden, 2024). These examples, both with strong causal identification, show that specific celebrity-related events can influence important political attitudes and behavior, like prejudice and policy attitudes, among specific celebrity fangroups. However, the specificity of these examinations into celebrity political influence raises questions about the findings' generalizability. It is unclear whether the evidence about celebrity political influence from studies of specific fanbases would apply to other fandom-celebrity dynamics, political events, and political attitudes and behaviors.

5   Experimental Design

To address the limitations of extant research designs in the celebrity influence literature, we propose an experimental design that first asks participants to identify the celebrity of whom they

Figure 1: Two-Wave Experimental Design

Wave 1: Celebrity elicitation (n=3171)

- Pre-treatment outcomes
    - Candidate affect
    - Enthusiasm index
    - Anxiety index
    - Likelihood of voting
- Favorite celebrity prompt
- Celebrity-related measures
    - Familiarity, favorability, identification
    - Political perceptions

↓

Invite to Wave 2 (n=1744)

- Minimum 7 day washout period
- Determine qualified participants
    - Passed attention check
    - Perceived same voting intentions
    - Celebrity meets inclusion criteria

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Wave 2: Randomized experiment (n=1503)

- Attention check
- Randomized experimental condition
- Preregistered primary outcomes
- Preregistered exploratory outcomes
- Debrief

Note: Flowchart demonstrating the order of the two-wave experimental design.

are the biggest fan, and then uses that celebrity in the experimental intervention pertaining to celebrity political involvement. This design improves the generalizability of evidence on celebrity influence in the political domain by avoiding the examination of a single celebrity or fandom. In this section, we explain the details of the design and how we used it in the context of presidential candidate endorsements.

We fielded the two-wave experimental design prior to the 2024 United States Presidential Election to test our preregistered hypotheses. Figure 1 visualizes the design. We use CloudResearch Connect's online survey panel for this experiment because at the time of fielding it had recently been demonstrated to use thorough quality-control methods to ensure a high-quality, attentive respondent pool (Hartman et al., 2023). First, we recruited partici-

pants to take a Wave 1 survey. After obtaining informed consent for both survey waves, the Wave 1 survey collected pre-treatment measures of the outcomes—candidate affect, enthusiasm, anxiety, and likelihood of voting.[2] From each participant, we then sought to elicit the name of the celebrity of whom they are the biggest fan. For brevity, we call this the participants' "most-liked" celebrity To elicit this celebrity's name, we asked the following survey item:

> Next, we are going to switch gears a bit.
>
> We are going to ask some questions about what people call **celebrities, influencers, personalities, or public figures**. We will call this group of people "**celebrities**" for short.
>
> There are all kinds of celebrities and fans these days.
>
> - **Big and small celebrities:** Some celebrities have wide followings and are household names. With the rise of social media, other celebrities (aka "influencers") might have much smaller fanbases and not appear in mainstream media. We consider both as "celebrities."
> - **Big and small fans:** Some people are bigger fans of a celebrity than others. Some people who are bigger fans might attend events related to that celebrity, collect memorabilia, participate in fan communities, and express support through social media. Some people who are smaller fans of a celebrity might simply enjoy following the celebrity's career updates. We consider both kinds of people "fans."
> - **Various interests:** Celebrities emerge from various facets of life and culture, such as music, comedy, entertainment, sports, literature, art, fashion, beauty, the culinary world, fitness and wellness, gaming, technology, travel, parenting and family advice, DIY tasks and home-improvement, science and education, lifestyle and home decor.
>
> **We would like you to take a moment to think about the celebrities you consider yourself a fan of**–whether you are a big or small fan, and whether the celebrity is widely-known or not.
>
> Can you think of someone? [Yes/No]

If the participant indicated "No," we gave the participant more time to reflect. Then, for all participants who indicated "Yes" to the first or the follow-up question, we elicited the name

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[2]The specific question wording for candidate affect was "Please rate the following candidates currently running for President of the United States in the 2024 election. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward and don't care too much for that person. You would rate a person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward them." with rating for Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. The specific question wording for the anxiety index and the enthusiasm index was: "Many Americans report feeling different emotions about the candidates running in the 2024 United States Presidential Election. Please indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with the following statement: The idea of voting for [Kamala Harris and Tim Walz/Donald Trump and JD Vance] makes me feel...:" with ratings of "Afraid," "Anxious," and "Worried" for the anxiety index and "Proud," "Hopeful," and "Enthusiastic" for the enthusiasm index. We calculated the average response for each index. Finally, the question wording for the likelihood of voting was: "Many people intend to vote in elections, but sometimes don't for various reasons, such as being busy or things coming up. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'definitely will not vote' and 10 means 'definitely will vote,' how likely are you to vote in the upcoming 2024 United States Presidential Election held November 5, 2024?"

of their most-liked celebrity by asking the following open-ended question: "Please tell us just the name of the celebrity you are the ***biggest*** fan of—whether you are a big or small fan, and whether the celebrity is widely-known or not."

Using this prompt provides an important methodological innovation in the celebrity influence literature, as it allows us to estimate treatment effects of celebrity-related interventions that are personalized to the respondent (e.g., Velez and Liu, 2025). This approach better reflects how celebrity endorsements operate in the real world, where people are exposed to numerous endorsements but pay the most attention to endorsements from celebrities they already follow and favor. Therefore, the estimated treatment effects from this design likely provide a more generalizable estimate of celebrity influence than prior experimental findings, since they aggregate the individual effects of each participant's most-liked celebrity.

The remainder of the Wave 1 survey asked several questions specific to the elicited celebrity. We measured participants' level of fandom, engagement with the celebrity, and their perceptions of the celebrity's political beliefs and behaviors, including the candidate (if any) they believed the celebrity would vote for and whether they believed the celebrity would publicly endorse a candidate in the election. We fielded Wave 1 from October 9-17, 2024 and recruited 3171 participants.

Because our celebrity elicitation prompt was open-ended by design, it elicited some celebrities that were not relevant to our hypotheses. Therefore, prior to fielding the randomized interventions in Wave 2, we applied pre-registered exclusion criteria to the elicited celebrities, such as excluding traditional political actors to focus on celebrity influence (see Appendix A for exclusion criteria details). In particular, we pre-registered only being interested in participants who perceived themselves and the celebrity to be politically aligned. Therefore, we include only those participants who believe the celebrity would vote for the same candidate in the 2024 presidential election as they would.[3] This exclusion criterion also increases the external validity of the experimental findings. While some of the celebrity endorsements in the experiment may seem unlikely to nonfans, the individuals in our experimental sample all reported pre-treatment that they believed their most-liked celebrity would vote for the candidate that would appear in the celebrity endorsement condition of the experiment.

Prior to Wave 2, we had a washout period of at least seven days for every respondent. The

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[3]While celebrity endorsements may politically cross-pressure voters, this is beyond the scope of our hypotheses. We preregistered interest in celebrities perceived to be politically aligned because we suspected this is the more common scenario in U.S. politics today. Appendix C uses our Wave 1 data to show support for this idea.

washout period was designed to minimize respondents' memory of providing their most-liked celebrity to the researchers in Wave 1. After a washout period, we invited 1744 participants to Wave 2 and 1563 (90%) returned and took the survey between October 24, 2024 and November 4, 2024.

Wave 2 began with an attention check prior to treatment randomization. We exclude those who failed it (n=60) from treatment effect estimation. Therefore, our experimental sample contains 1503 participants. The 1503 participants were then block randomized based on their pre-treatment level of fan identity (high or low).[4] We randomized participants to three experimental conditions randomly within these two blocks to increase the precision of our treatment effect estimates (Diaz and Rossiter, 2025; Moore, 2012).

The first experimental condition was the "No endorsement" condition, a control condition containing the following short reading, formatted like a news article, to prime the election without mentioning any celebrity endorsements:

Countdown to the 2024 Election

The 2024 election is coming up, taking place on November 5th between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. The candidates are increasing their campaign activity as the election nears. In this critical period, both candidates are working to engage voters and convey their visions for the future of the country. With key issues dominating the conversation, each candidate is vying to resonate with the electorate and secure their support.

The second experimental condition was the "General celebrity endorsement" condition, in which respondents read a short news article stating that many celebrities were beginning to make endorsements, including three fictional celebrity names. The third experimental condition was the "Most-liked celebrity endorsement" condition, in which respondents read an identical text as the "General celebrity endorsement" condition, but the name of their most-liked celebrity from Wave 1 was added as a celebrity endorser. Both of these conditions pertained to the candidate the respondent indicated they would most likely vote for in the 2024 election in our Wave 1 survey. Recall, we preregistered an inclusion criteria to include only respondents who believed the celebrity would vote for the same candidate. The two celebrity endorsement conditions contained the following text:

Celebrities, Influencers, and Public Figures Line Up Behind [Preferred candidate] With Endorsements

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[4]See Appendix D for details on the randomization procedure.

> Celebrities, influencers, and public figures continue to endorse [Preferred candidate] as the 2024 election approaches. More and more of these endorsements, from both big and small celebrities, are happening every day in the lead up to November 5th.
>
> Backing for [Preferred candidate] now comes from a diverse array of public figures, including **[Most-liked celebrity], Nova Skye, Devon Hart, and Clara Davenport.**
>
> These endorsements may be a signal of growing momentum for [Preferred candidate], as influential voices across the country continue to rally in support of their campaign.

After reading their assigned experimental condition, all respondents answered survey questions measuring our preregistered primary and exploratory outcomes. (See our preregistration for question wordings.) Finally, all respondents were debriefed.
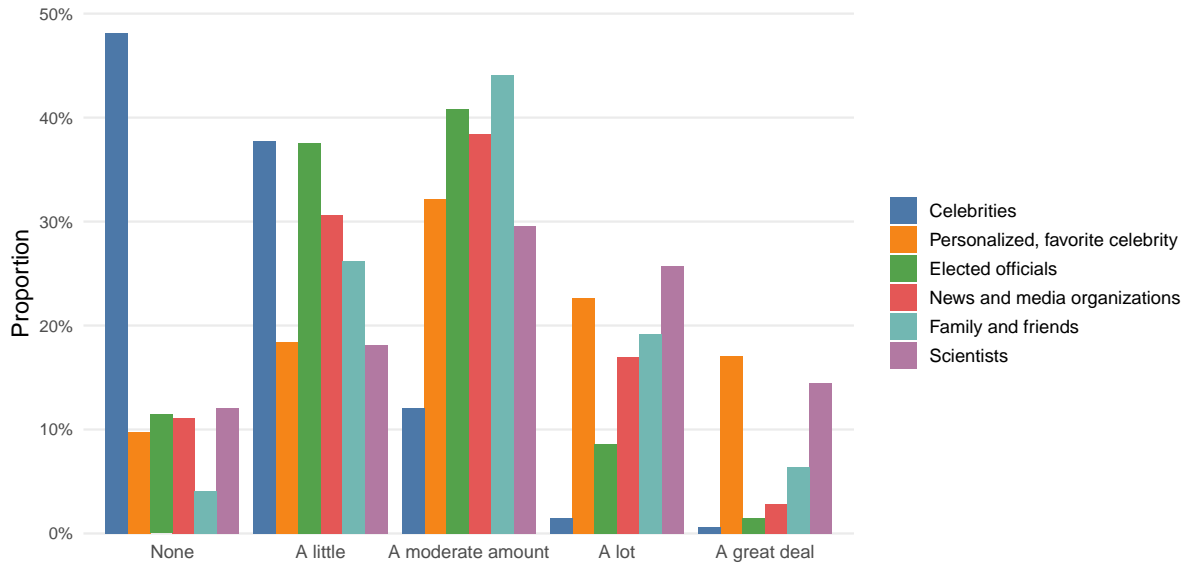
6   Validating the "Most-Liked" Celebrity Prompt

Before presenting our estimated treatment effects, we demonstrate that our "most-liked" celebrity prompt elicited celebrities with whom respondents have a strong, positive emotional connection, validating the use of this prompt for creating a personalized celebrity influence intervention.

First, we contextualize the type of celebrity our prompt elicited. Among the 1503 participants in our experimental design, we elicited 570 unique celebrities in Wave 1, then used to personalized the treatment in Wave 2. Appendix B enumerates the frequency each unique celebrity provided. Seventeen celebrities were provided more than 10 times—Taylor Swift (203), Elon Musk (57), Keanu Reeves (32), George Clooney (28), Bruce Springsteen (26), Oprah Winfrey (25), Beyoncé (23), LeBron James (21), Tom Hanks (20), Kid Rock (17), Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (13), Kanye West (13), Chappell Roan (12), Jon Stewart (12), Clint Eastwood (11), Denzel Washington (11), and Eminem (11). These celebrities span gender, race, age, and industry, demonstrating the success of our design in eliciting celebrities across the fragmented cultural landscape. Indeed, 387 celebrities were elicited only once and span more—and more niche—subcultures.

We further validate our design by assessing pre-treatment measures of participants' familiarity, favorability, and fan identity with the celebrity elicited using our prompt. First, respondents self-report being very familiar with the life and work of their most-liked celebrity, with 35.6% being "moderately," 33.6% "very," and 17.2% "extremely" familiar . Only 1.2% said they were "not familiar at all" with the life and work of the elicited celebrity, and only 12.3% said they were "slightly familiar." Moreover, 89% of our sample said they spent at least some time every week learning about the celebrity or consuming content directly from them, with 37.3% of our sample

Figure 2: How Much Respondents Trust a Favored Celebrity on Politics Relative to Other Sources

Note: Bar graph summarizing how much respondents trust each of the six sources on political matters (n=1503). The proportions are calculated per source. The survey item asked, "People get information about politics, public policy, and elections from a variety of different sources. Next, we are going to ask a few questions about the sources you trust when it comes to political matters. How much do you trust [source] when it comes to political matters?"

reporting they spend over an hour every week doing so. These high rates provide reassurance that the prompt elicited a celebrity the participants encounter in their everyday lives, important to ensuring this design improves generalizability in its estimates of celebrity influence. In terms of favorability with the elicited celebrity, we asked the standard 101-point feeling thermometer pre-treatment. Respondents feel very positive toward the celebrity, with a median rating of 95 (IQR: 87-100). Indeed, 40% of our sample rated their celebrity at 100. To further investigate an emotional connection with the celebrity, we also asked about the importance of identifying as a fan of the celebrity to their everyday life. We asked, "On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not important at all' and 10 means 'extremely important,' how important is identifying as a fan of [celebrity name] to your everyday life?" Describing something as important to daily life is a high threshold to meet. Therefore, it is not surprising that fan identity was "not important at all" to 20% of our sample. However, we believe it is strong validation of our most-liked celebrity prompt that half of our sample felt that their fan identity was moderately important or more to their everyday life.

Finally, we investigate trust. We asked participants how much they trust a variety of sources when it comes to political matters. Figure 2 shows how much respondents trust each source.

Celebrities *in general* (dark blue bars) and elected officials (green bars) are not trusted when it comes to political matters (Harvey, 2018), with only 10% of respondents trusting them "a lot" or "a great deal." In contrast, 40% of respondents trust their most-liked celebrity a lot or a great deal when it comes to political matters (orange bars), on par with scientists (40%, purple bars) and exceeding family and friends (26%, light blue bars).
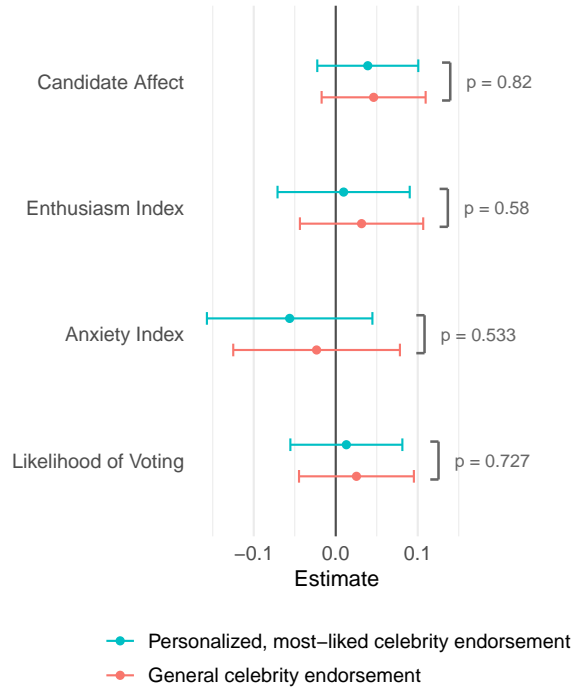
In sum, we elicited celebrities whom participants are familiar with, favorable toward, and even consider their identity as a fan of the celebrity important to their everyday lives. Beyond these measures suggesting our sample provided celebrities of whom they are devoted fans, we also show that the elicited most-liked celebrity is a trusted source in the political arena. These descriptive results provide reassurance that our prompt allows us to test our hypotheses and estimate more generalizable treatment effects pertaining to the effect of endorsements from most-liked celebrities.[5]

7   Results

Before presenting treatment effect estimates testing our preregistered expectations, we discuss whether respondents were attentive to and believed the personalized celebrity endorsements used in the experiment. First, we asked a factual manipulation check after administering the treatment, and only 0.8% (n=12) of participants failed it, suggesting the sample was attentive to the treatment (Kane and Barabas, 2019) (See Appendix F for details). Second, we assess whether participants were likely to believe the treatment. As noted above, our preregistered exclusion criteria already give us confidence the participants would not be skeptical of seeing the endorsement as we only include participants who believe their most-liked celebrity would vote for the same candidate as they would—the same candidate used in the personalized endorsement condition. However, this is the candidate the respondents expected the celebrity to privately vote for, not necessarily publicly endorse. Therefore, we also asked pre-treatment whether respondents thought their most-liked celebrity would engage in public endorsements. We find that only 6.5% of the experimental sample thought their most-liked celebrity "definitely will not" publicly support a candidate in the 2024 United States Presidential Election, and 20.7% thought the celebrity "probably will not." A majority of individuals thought the celebrity "definitely" would endorse a candidate (39.7%), "probably" would endorse a candidate (19%), or were

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[5]See Appendix G for additional descriptive statistics in the sample and evidence that pre-treatment covariates were balanced across the three experimental groups.

Figure 3: Estimated Treatment Effects for Primary Preregistered Expectations

Note: Figure displays treatment effects (in standard deviation units) for the four primary preregistered outcomes (n=1503). Points represent the estimated treatment effect for the general celebrity endorsement (blue) and the personalized, most-liked celebrity endorsement (orange), each relative to the no endorsement control. Gray brackets note p-values for the primary comparison between the general and the most-liked celebrity endorsements. Appendix E shows the full table of numerical results for each estimated model.

unsure (13.8%). These pre-treatment expectations suggest that the majority of participants would not approach the personalized celebrity endorsement in our experiment with skepticism. We also assess the robustness of our results when excluding the 27.2% of individuals who did not expect an endorsement (See Appendix F). When we re-estimate treatment effects excluding this group of likely skeptics, results are consistent but for one outcome, which we discuss below.

Next, we present treatment effect estimates using our full sample to test our primary pre-registered expectations and a set of exploratory preregistered analyses. In all models, we use the same preregistered estimation approach. We regress the outcome on indicators for the ran-domized treatment group, the associated pre-treatment measure of the outcome (if available), and control for randomization block (Clifford et al., 2021; Diaz and Rossiter, 2025). We stan-dardized the outcomes and their pre-treatment measures to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 for ease of interpretation. Therefore, treatment effect estimates are interpreted in standard deviation units of the outcome.
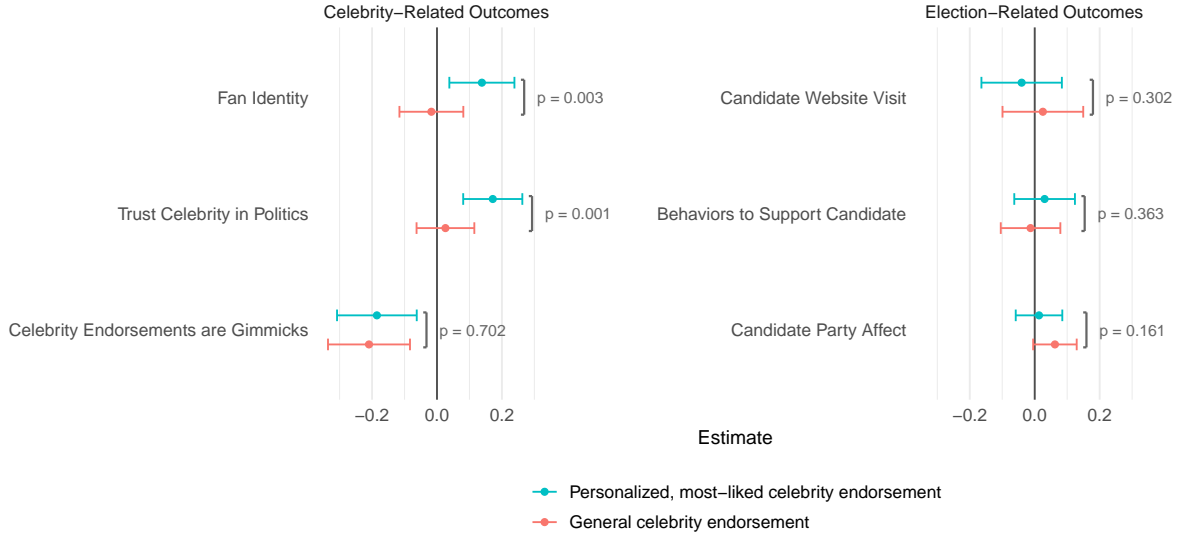
Figure 3 visualizes the estimated sample average treatment effects and 95% confidence in-tervals testing our primary preregistered expectations. Appendix E shows the full numerical

results. Blue points show the effect of the general celebrity endorsement relative to the no endorsement control. Across our four primary outcomes of interest—candidate affect, enthusiasm, anxiety, and likelihood of voting—we find no evidence that endorsements from most-liked celebrities have stronger effects on these outcomes than endorsements from celebrities in general (gray p-values). Moreover, we fail to find evidence that most-liked celebrities and celebrities in general affect these outcomes at all, relative to the no endorsement control (orange and blue estimates, respectively). These results are robust to excluding the group of participants who we suspect would be skeptical of the celebrity endorsement treatment based on their pre-treatment expectations about the celebrity making an endorsement (See Appendix F for numerical results).

We also pre-registered celebrity-related and election-related exploratory analyses to build on what the celebrity influence literature in political science has traditionally emphasized. Building on the results in Figure 3, Figure 4 shows that we again find no evidence to suggest celebrity endorsements, whether personalized or not, affect election-related outcomes. We expanded the scope of our investigation to now include a behavioral outcome of participants visiting their preferred candidate's website when invited to during the Wave 2 survey, an index averaging the likelihood participants would engage in four behaviors to support their preferred candidate, and affect toward their preferred candidate's party measured with a 101-point feeling thermometer. Neither general celebrity endorsements nor most-liked celebrity endorsements have an effect distinct from no endorsements, and they are not distinct from each other.

However, treatment effects on celebrity-related outcomes tell a different story. Only endorsements from one's most-liked celebrity cause one's identity as a fan of that celebrity to increase, both relative to no endorsement and a general celebrity endorsement. Figure 4 shows the same pattern of results for trusting the celebrity when it comes to political matters. Endorsements by one's most-liked celebrity increased trust, relative to general celebrity endorsements and no endorsements. Finally, both general and most-liked celebrity endorsement conditions decreased the belief that political campaigns use celebrities as a gimmick to distract from real issues. Results for fan identity and celebrity trust are robust to excluding the group of participants who we suspect would be skeptical of the celebrity endorsement treatment based on their pre-treatment expectations about the celebrity making an endorsement. However, the significant effect of most-liked celebrity endorsements on decreasing the belief that celebrity endorsements are gimmicks fails the robustness check and is no longer significant (See Appendix F for numerical results). We note that this robustness check was not preregistered, and future research is

17

Figure 4: Estimated Treatment Effects for Exploratory Preregistered Analyses

Note: Figure displays treatment effects (in standard deviation units) for six exploratory preregistered analyses (n=1503). Points represent the estimated treatment effect for the general celebrity endorsement (blue) and the personalized celebrity endorsement (orange), each relative to the no endorsement control. Gray brackets note p-values for the primary comparison between the general and the personalized celebrity endorsements. Appendix E shows the full table of numerical results for each estimated model.

needed to resolve the inconsistency in these estimates.[6]

8 Discussion

We find that celebrity candidate endorsements increase identity as a fan and trust in the celebrity in political matters without altering political attitudes. This suggests that celebrity political involvement increases fans' parasocial relationships with the celebrity, activating and strengthening emotional attachment. While we found no immediate effects on political attitudes and behaviors, building the foundation of a parasocial relationship may be an important step for celebrity political influence in the future (Kim and Patterson Jr, 2025). Moreover, we unexpectedly found that endorsements by personalized and non-personalized celebrities decreased the perception that celebrity endorsements are gimmicks. This suggests that fans may not desire celebrities they are fans of—or celebrities in general—to "shut up and dribble," a common phrase meaning celebrities should not use their platforms to speak about political issues. This aligns with prior research showing fans actually engage with the celebrities' political content *more* than with the celebrities' non-political content (Harff and Schmuck, 2025; Zilinsky et al.,

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[6]Appendix H discusses all other preregistered robustness checks.

2020). Moreover, celebrity political involvement that aligns with fans' preferences may be a mechanism increasing the perceived legitimacy of the broader practice of celebrities speaking out in politics (Street, 2004).

Our design is not without limitations. First, our null results on political outcomes may be underestimates of celebrity political influence for several reasons. Our open-ended, most-liked celebrity prompt was a difficult cognitive task, and as such, may not have elicited the celebrity of whom our participants were the biggest fans. If so, this would dampen our estimated treatment effects. Our design may also be underestimating treatment effects due to the context of presidential candidate endorsements. Participants may have already had firm opinions on the candidates and their decision to vote when we fielded our study; thus, the treatments containing celebrity endorsements may have had ceiling effects on our outcomes of interest. We may have found stronger effects if the study had been run earlier in the campaigns. Moreover, the generalizability of our findings may be limited to candidate endorsements, leaving open the question of how fandoms may shift attitudes when celebrities comment on political and social issues.

9   Conclusion

In an experiment on celebrity endorsements for 2024 U.S. presidential candidates, we fail to find evidence that such endorsements matter for candidate evaluations, emotions, or the likelihood of voting. Indeed, our experiment was designed to elicit the celebrity of whom each participant was the biggest fan to assess influence in the place where it was most likely to be found. Nevertheless, even personalizing the standard celebrity endorsement intervention to include one's most-liked celebrity did not result in significant treatment effects on political attitudes and behaviors. However, most-liked celebrities' endorsements did increase fan identity and political trust in the celebrity. This result suggests that when celebrities get involved in politics in ways that align with their fans' preferences, fans strengthen their emotional connection, or parasocial relationship, with the celebrity, which could beget future political influence. The experimental design we introduce also provides an important contribution by addressing generalizability as a key, common limitation of research designs in this literature.

This experimental design is suited to investigate new ways celebrities are involved in politics. First, a wider range of celebrities are speaking out in politics, and this design allows for the

assessment of this influence without needing to determine who the politically relevant celebrities are ex ante, with participants crowd-sourcing the relevant list of celebrities instead. This approach allows for the proliferation of influencers, in particular, to be more readily studied as celebrities of whom people are fans (Riedl et al., 2023), with evidence of strong engagement by fans when influencers dive into political topics (Harff and Schmuck, 2025). Influencers are an important group because their fandoms often have parasocial relationships, where the fan forms a strong emotional bond with the influencer. While people used to build parasocial ties with celebrities when watching weekly television content that dominated culture, such as Donald Trump's *The Apprentice* (Kim and Patterson Jr, 2025), now cultural content is highly personalized through algorithmic social media feeds and streaming recommendations. The smaller, personalized audiences that influencers curate through social media allow for a more personal, intimate connection that could lead to greater influence over their followers than previously understood (e.g., Leith, 2021; Sherrick et al., 2023). Our design provides one approach to support the systematic study of the extensive landscape of influencers.

Another burgeoning phenomenon in fan-celebrity dynamics is the expectation, and even the demand, among some fandoms that celebrities use their platforms to speak on salient issues. For example, a Beyoncé fan wrote a critique of her appearance at a 2024 Harris/Walz rally, arguing that Beyoncé was not doing enough in the critical election. The fan said she realized "I want— maybe even need—to know where my faves stand on tough and controversial issues, and that I want them to use their platforms to fight injustice" (Iwegbue, 2024). Indeed, many fandoms are not put off by celebrity political engagement, but actually engage with celebrities' political content more than non-political content (Harff and Schmuck, 2025; Zilinsky et al., 2020). Fan groups have even worked collectively to make celebrities hear their voices and demands, for example, with an online movement to digitally boycott many celebrities who were staying silent on Israel's war in Gaza (Shamim, 2024). This suggests celebrities' *inactivity* in politics can also spur political engagement, even collective action efforts, among fans. Our design can support future inquiry into how this supply–demand loop, wherein fans demand political engagement and celebrities supply it, affects parasocial relationships and political attitudes and behaviors of fans.

In sum, as celebrity culture becomes increasingly personalized and politicized, it is essential to better understand how fans' attention to and connection with celebrities shapes political attitudes and behaviors in the public. We encourage future research investigating the dynamics

of celebrity political influence in the place where it is most likely to occur—among fans—and our design offers a promising framework to do so.

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