



Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?

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This article asks what it means to take celebrity politics seriously. It does so from three perspectives. It begins by looking at the case of New Labour and the role that celebrity politics played in party political communication and in government policy-making. It places both in the context of New Labour's cultural policy more broadly. This leads to a second perspective, in which the focus is upon how celebrity politics might be seen within social and political change more generally. A contrast is drawn between the 'late modernity' approach adopted by David Marsh and his colleagues, and the media-oriented approach adopted by Aeron Davis. Both approaches, it is suggested, invite a turn to empirical investigation, and the article's final section reviews existing research into celebrity politics, and argues for more emphasis on (a) cross-national comparison of forms of celebrity politics, and (b) audience perceptions of celebrity politicians, going beyond the current focus on large-scale surveys and experimentation.

Keywords: celebrity politics; New Labour; political communication

Introduction

The election of President Barack Obama in November 2008 might seem to confirm the arrival of the celebrity politician. Here was a man whose campaign speeches were set to a hip hop beat, under the auspices of will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yq0tMyPDJQ>). 'Yes we can', with its cast of pop, film and sports stars, was downloaded several million times, and became, together with extensive use of Facebook and Twitter, another pop cultural component in the latest incarnation of what Pippa Norris (1996) once dubbed the 'post-modern' election campaign. Where Bill Clinton had played saxophone and Tony Blair had posed with his guitar, Obama essayed a cool dance with Ellen DeGeneres on her chat show. The endorsements from Hollywood stars and Grammy-winning rock stars that accompanied Obama on the stump were brought to centre stage for the Inauguration concert, when the president was serenaded by Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Bruce Springsteen and Beyoncé, among many others, and when his presidency was heralded by speeches from the likes of Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington, Jack Black and Jamie Foxx. It was almost impossible to tell where the show business ended and the politics began.

But while the Obama campaign, if not the presidency itself, can be recast in the guise of celebrity politics, in the blurring of pop culture styles, platforms and stars, it does not follow that any of this matters, at least not to political scientists (as opposed to, say, media and cultural studies scholars). This article is an attempt to



address this issue. It aims to identify the different ways in which celebrity politics may matter, and to identify a research agenda that will enable us to understand more precisely its impact and importance. For while the literature on celebrity politics is growing, it might be argued that it offers more in the way of theory and speculation than hard evidence.

One issue that the burgeoning literature has raised is the definition of 'celebrity politics' and the 'celebrity politician', and before going further it is necessary to say a brief word on this topic. One of the earliest attempts to produce a systematic typology of celebrity politics was that provided by Darren West and John Orman (2003). They identified five categories of 'celebrity politicians' (West and Orman 2003, 2), which, I have argued (Street 2004), can be reduced to two: first, the traditional politician who emerges from a background in show business or who uses the techniques of popular culture to seek (and acquire) elected office (for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Ronald Reagan); and second, the celebrity who seeks to influence the exercise of political power by way of their fame and status (for example, Bono or Bob Geldof). This simplification has itself been criticised, most recently by David Marsh and his colleagues (Marsh et al. 2010). They propose instead a more nuanced typology of 'celebrity advocate', 'celebrity activist/endorser', 'celebrity politician', 'politician celebrity' and 'politician who uses others' celebrity' (Marsh et al. 2010, 327). This elaboration allows us to see the various roles played by the celebrity politician, but there is a danger that in doing so we lose sight of what the word 'celebrity' adds to our perspective on political practice and the interests that forge it. I would argue that keeping the definition simple allows us to ask how the uses of show business and popular culture affect political practice, where more multifaceted definitions tend to accommodate celebrities within the complexities of existing political processes. Rather than accommodating celebrity politics, we need to ask first how and in what ways it differs from other forms of political engagement. My attempt to answer this question takes three forms. First, it considers the case of New Labour and asks what we might learn about celebrity politics from its approach to both political communication and policy-making. The article then moves on to the theorisation of celebrity politics and the attempt to see it as part of wider changes in politics. And finally, I review the research that has sought to ground claims about the impact of celebrity politics.

From Cool Britannia to Cultural Policy

New Labour has come to epitomise the phenomenon of celebrity politics. This stems in part from its association with 'Cool Britannia', the label attributed by the magazine *Vanity Fair* to the concatenation of so-called Britpop (Blur, Oasis, etc.), British fashion (in the guise of designers like Stella McCartney), the Young British Artists associated with Goldsmiths (Damien Hirst, most particularly) and Tony Blair's reconstituted Labour party. While the label was to enjoy a very brief currency, what underlay it had a longer shelf-life.

The journalist John Harris (2003) provides details of the delicate negotiations that took place between some if not all, the figureheads of Britpop and New Labour. Celebrities and politicians did not come together in some spontaneous love-in.

Rather, the alliance was the product of an altogether more cautious courtship. Harris describes one moment in these protracted discussions:

With his eternally watchful eye on possible future mishap, Alastair Campbell quizzed [Damon] Albarn [of Blur] in as pointed a fashion as the occasion would allow ... 'This is great, and we're really glad that you might want to help, and we want to talk to you about that, but what if you turn round and say, "Tony's a wanker?"' (Harris 2003, 198)

These talks resulted eventually in ringing endorsements of Labour in the run-up to the election. This moment of harmony was later to turn sour as the realities of politics confronted pop idealism, and turned especially nasty in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nonetheless, the harnessing of celebrities to the New Labour cause, and the party's adoption of popular culture (e.g. D:Ream's 'Things can only get better') to articulate its brand, were both important dimensions to its mode of political communication.

Importantly, though, this was not the party's first dalliance with popular culture. In 1986, in a desperate attempt to recover from the loss incurred in the 1983 general election, Labour acted as co-sponsor, with the trade union movement, of Red Wedge (Frith and Street 1992; Bragg 2006). Musicians like Paul Weller and Billy Bragg, together with members of the emerging alternative comedy circuit, performed at gigs across the country under the Red Wedge banner. These events were also attended by Labour MPs and other representatives of the party, who used the occasion to recruit support for the cause. Despite drawing inspiration from Live Aid, Red Wedge did not come close to matching its success (Street 1988). In his autobiography, Tony Blair (2010, 91) reports wryly on the experience, describing Red Wedge as 'a little bizarre', adding: 'It was great. But I remember saying after one of their gigs—and, by the way, Billy Bragg was someone I got to know later and really liked—"We need to reach the people listening to Duran Duran and Madonna" (a comment that went down like a cup of sick)'. What is revealing about this remark is its implicit assumption that 'reaching' potential supporters entailed understanding their cultural lives and adopting the methods of communication that marked those lives. Such thinking was indicative of the way in which the politics was understood and communicated. New Labour's use of celebrity culture to convey its electoral message did not end with its accession to power.

After 1997, New Labour made increasing use of celebrities in the delivery of policy. This did have its superficial side. The winner (and now judge) of the television show *Strictly Come Dancing*, Alesha Dixon, was photographed—apparently naked—in a bath of red condoms (imitating a scene from the film *American Beauty*). She was being used by the Department of Health to front a campaign promoting safe sex, just as the grime star Tinchy Stryder was used to help in encouraging young people into higher education, and the band N-Dubz to combat bullying at school. These initiatives were criticised, partly, as in the case of N-Dubz, for their inappropriateness—a member of N-Dubz was exposed as something of a bully himself (BBC News Online, 15 January 2010). The other criticism came from the revelation that the celebrities were being paid to participate in these campaigns and that departmental budgets were being used in this way (*The Observer*, 1 January 2009, 17). Of course, governments have long used celebrities to publicise their

campaigns (the DJ Jimmy Savile was recruited to the safety belt campaign—‘clunk-click, every trip’). What was different with New Labour was the extent of the use and, perhaps more importantly, the intimacy of the links.

This intimacy is best illustrated in the seriousness with which New Labour took popular culture, a seriousness that was to be measured both culturally and economically. Popular culture was the focus of many New Labour initiatives, from the Creative Partnerships to the Film Council to the New Deal for Musicians (Cloonan 2007). An example of the government’s approach was the Creative Industries Task Force, one of whose most prominent members was Alan McGee, the owner of the record label to which Oasis were signed (Hewison 2001, 537). New Labour’s investment in the system that produced celebrities was indicative of a more complex set of links with celebrity culture than simply as a bearer of messages.

The implications of these connections for celebrity politics can best be illustrated through the case of Live8 and its leaders Bob Geldof and Bono. The set of concerts that constituted Live8 were timed to coincide both with the 20th anniversary of Live Aid and with the G8 summit in Gleneagles in July 2005. Where Live Aid in 1985 took the form of two concerts (in London and Philadelphia) to raise money for the victims of famine in Ethiopia, Live8 was designed to create political pressure, and to give force to the campaign to end the debts of the developing world, a campaign that had been initiated by Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History (Nash 2008).

Much has been said about Live8, and especially about its impact. The focus, however, has been on whether the G8 decision did indeed benefit developing countries, on whether celebrity-led initiatives marginalise established NGOs to the detriment of the causes they represent, and on the politics of the discourses that campaigns like Live8 articulate (Couldry and Markham 2007; Sireau and Davis 2007; Nash 2008). These are clearly important issues, but they tend to overlook the question with which I am concerned here—does celebrity politics matter? In this case, is there evidence that the Live8 celebrities directly influenced public policy? We know that Geldof claims success for his efforts (Hague et al. 2008), but this is not itself proof of influence. Even where we witness the actress Joanna Lumley browbeating a hapless minister (Phil Woolas) over the rights of Gurkhas, the appearance of power and influence may be misleading (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcdeK27Y65s>).

One of the historians of New Labour, Anthony Seldon (2007, 370), describes Live8 as ‘one of those rare occasions in world history where collective public pressure moved politicians’. In doing so, Seldon conflates the concerts and the music with public opinion. And in reporting how Blair gave Bono the opportunity to address the leaders at a reception in Number 10 Downing Street, Seldon (2007, 371) also presents U2’s singer as representative of that opinion. Echoing these thoughts, Alastair Campbell (2007, 490) reports Blair as saying that ‘Bono and Geldof were a good double act, and deadly serious on the policy front’. Such accounts certainly create the impression that celebrity politicians exercise influence.

Blair (2010, 554) himself describes in his autobiography how he set up the Commission for Africa ‘at the instigation of Bob Geldof’. He characterises Geldof as

'unreasonable in his persistence', but balances this with the thought that the ex-singer of the Boomtown Rats is both 'smart' and 'brave'. Perhaps more revealingly, Blair (2010, 555) says how he 'knew Bono would be an important person to get to see George [W. Bush]'. Bono, comments Blair (2010, 555), 'had an absolutely natural gift for politicking'. What Blair seems to be suggesting is that he used Bono as part of his strategy to get the US onside for his (Blair's) debt reduction policy. And when, following a press conference to announce the G8 decision, an NGO representative complained about the limits of the achievement, Blair (2010, 570) seemed to delight in Geldof's irate reaction. In short, Blair's own account puts Geldof and Bono close to the centre of the story of the policy change, but significantly assigns them the role of presenting that policy, rather than in crafting it.

It is not possible, on the basis of this evidence, to establish whether actors like Bono and Geldof were actually able to influence policy, but the evidence does suggest that they were seen to be legitimate participants in the policy process and were granted opportunities denied to other actors. It is also observed that time and trouble were taken to involve celebrities in the business of campaigning and in the delivery of policy. But this too constitutes circumstantial evidence of influence and importance. There is, therefore, room for further empirical research into the form and extent of celebrity influence in the policy process.

Theorising Celebrity Power

Such research needs to be accompanied by a refinement of the theory of celebrity politics, and in particular the part played by celebrities in the circulation of power. We have the basis for such a project—from Leo Braudy's (1997) vast and detailed historical analysis of 'fame' to P. David Marshall's (1997) post-modern synthesis of cultural and political celebrity. We also have work on the 'spectacularisation' of politics in the writings of Danilo Zolo (1992) and Colin Crouch (2004). For both of these latter writers, the emergence of the celebrity politician is linked to the emergence of a post-democratic order in which politics is transmuted into a spectacle that is to be performed to an audience, not of citizens, but of spectators. Similar, if less apocalyptic, theories emerge in discussion of the 'personalisation of politics' (see, for instance, Swanson and Mancini 1996). For the purposes of this piece, however, I want to concentrate on two more recent attempts to theorise the celebrity politician by Aeron Davis (2010) and David Marsh et al. (2010), both of which are directed specifically at a political science readership.

Marsh et al. (2010, 326) claim that the discussion of celebrity politics has been hampered by a failure to place it in the context of late modernity. Actually Crouch and Zolo and others (see Corner and Pels 2003) have done just this, but Marsh et al. do provide a more detailed account of how celebrity politics is associated with key features of governance in late modernity: the move from hierarchies to networks, the hollowing out of the state, the fluidity of identity, the increased importance of the media and so on. They draw, in particular, on the work of Henrik Bang, and his suggestion that citizens act increasingly as 'Everyday Makers', which is to say that they participate in their societies, but not within the state or according to established ideological positions. Celebrity politics provides a means of engaging with

such detached citizens. Marsh and his colleagues acknowledge that Bang's argument, despite his subsequent use (Bang 2009) of the Obama campaign as an illustration, is 'empirically light' and that its 'empirical basis is limited' (Marsh et al. 2010, 328). This is, I think, a polite way of saying that it constitutes speculation rather than substantiation.

Marsh et al. also take from Bang the suggestion that we are seeing the rise of a new form of party, a development of the cartel party, which can be dubbed 'expert-celebrity party'. This entity seeks to assemble interests and identities and their associated policy agendas. Celebrity politics here functions to convince electorates that they are being well governed. Once again, Marsh et al. (2010, 330) concede that Bang's argument 'is not easy to address empirically'. Nonetheless, they still want to claim that his approach 'does raise important issues about the relationship between celebrity, politics and democracy' (Marsh et al. 2010, 330).

Despite these gestures of support for Bang's approach, Marsh and his colleagues do not pursue the important issues they identify. Instead, they rework now familiar debates about the risks and benefits of celebrity politics to democracy, ignoring their earlier claims about how celebrity politics might be defined or how it might be integrated into late-modern governance. And they end by reviewing a limited selection of attempts to provide the empirical foundations that they see as lacking in Bang's theorising. They concede that their contribution, made in the form of a review article, is confined to setting out lines of research. They perhaps underestimate the work that has already been done, by Zolo and Crouch, as well as by John Corner (2003). Nonetheless, they do contribute to a growing consensus about (a) the potential significance of celebrity politics, and (b) the need to see this significance in terms of emerging forms of governance. As I have suggested, one way in which the latter might develop is in relation to the role played by celebrities (and celebrity politics) in the formation and implementation of policy. Before developing this argument further, I want to turn to a rival account of celebrity politics' wider significance.

In his recent collection, *Political Communication and Social Theory*, Aeron Davis (2010) locates celebrity politics within forms of political communication, rather than forms of governance. For Davis, celebrity politics represents a particular aspect of the means by which politicians communicate with citizens, rather than being symptomatic of a paradigm shift in governance. To this extent, Davis' approach to celebrity draws inspiration from media and cultural studies (see Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005; Holmes and Redmond 2006). His argument applies Bourdieu's notion of capital to the political field. He argues that political and media actors struggle to accumulate and allocate forms of symbolic capital, and the outcome of their tussles determines the character of political communication and the interests it serves. He sees celebrity politics as a product of these skirmishes around symbolic capital.

While Davis' approach, like that of Marsh et al., represents a theoretical innovation, it has the added value of being empirically grounded. His argument is bolstered by interviews with politicians and journalists. What it also offers is a framework for comparative analysis. While Marsh et al. (2010, 337) acknowledge that celebrity politics features in 'many countries', they do not indicate—and their general theo-

retical approach does not allow for—how we might anticipate variations in the role that celebrity politics might occupy within a given regime. Davis' perspective does allow for exactly this. He suggests that we should anticipate variations in the accumulation and form of media capital, depending upon the types of media and political system. As he writes (Davis 2010, 94): 'a strong political field results in media reproducing the symbolic meta-capital of the institutions and personnel of the state. A strong journalistic field indicates that media and capital are more likely to constitute forms of capital in their own right within the political field'. The comparison may be baldly stated, but it does suggest a way forward in refining our understanding of how celebrity politics emerges at the interface between media and political systems.

Theorisation of celebrity politics, I would argue, needs to draw together more directly insights from political science and cultural and media studies, and indeed even from advertising and branding, where the use of celebrities is, of course, well established (Pringle 2004; Amholt 2005). While it is important to see the trends within, and consequences of, late modernity, they need to be inflected with the insights into media and cultural change that make possible the incarnation we know as the 'celebrity politician' or 'celebrity politics'.

Researching Celebrity Politics

But while it is easy enough to demand that empirical endeavour must accompany theoretical refinement, it is quite another to establish how this research might be conducted. My suggestion is that there are two ways in which such research might develop. The first of these would involve a greater emphasis on comparative study; the second requires greater emphasis on audience/citizen reception.

Comparative Approaches to Celebrity Politics

While many of the discussions of celebrity politics and celebrity politicians make reference to the ubiquity of the phenomenon, surprisingly few make any attempt to assess or refine this claim. Most of the discussion of celebrity politics is confined to either the US or the UK, and there is relatively little attempt to compare these two countries, or indeed any other nations. Certainly, it seems conceivable that variations in party and media structure might have consequences for the production and impact of celebrity politics. This would be implied by Davis' approach to celebrity politics, where the character of the political field and the allocation of capital within it have consequences for the form of political communication. Furthermore, while research on the effect of celebrity politics is, as I suggest below, limited in scope, it is possible to identify celebrity effects in the US (for example, Garthwaite and Moore 2008), and to draw a different conclusion in the UK, where a recent study has suggested that citizens are less likely to be persuaded by celebrity advocacy (Couldry et al. 2010). However sketchy the evidence, it is important for those interested in celebrity politics to address in more detail the processes by which 'celebrity' is produced in different political and media systems (Hesmondhalgh 2005). One notable attempt to venture outside the confines of the US or the UK is

a study of Taiwan (Henneberg and Chen 2007). This takes the view that general theories—particularly ‘Americanisation’—do not account for the presence of celebrity politics, and that it is necessary to take heed of ‘the country-specific cultural context’ (Henneberg and Chen 2007, 25).

We need to know more about variations between liberal democratic regimes, and between such regimes and more autocratic ones. Historically, it is the latter that have been most closely linked with many of the features that we now associate with liberal democratic celebrity politics. It is in authoritarian regimes that we have witnessed the cult of personality, the ‘aesthetisation’ of politics and the propagandist use of cultural symbolism.

Beyond the insights into celebrity politics provided by comparison between similar and different regime types, there is also scope for comparison within systems. There is, for example, relatively little analysis of the differential impact of celebrity involvement in different policy agendas, or the impact on the same policy agenda of different celebrities (see Wheeler 2006, as an exception). Advertisers and charities are themselves very conscious of these variations (Pringle 2004). (Comic Relief, for example, invests considerable time and money in researching its impact and its use of celebrities, e.g. <http://www.leapfrogresearch.co.uk/clients/red-nose-day>). Research with which I was involved explored to a limited extent the differential impact of musicians on Rock Against Racism in the 1970s and on Live8 in 2005 (Street et al. 2008), but our focus was primarily on the mechanics of celebrity campaigning. What is needed is more work that evaluates the impact of those campaigns—for instance, Jamie Oliver’s to improve healthy eating or Joanna Lumley’s on behalf of the Gurkhas.

Citizens and Celebrity Politics

Another area for further investigation is that of the impact of celebrity politics on citizens. There is an emerging body of research here, as Marsh et al. acknowledge, but it tends to be concentrated in the US and to share a methodology. One strand (Garthwaite and Moore 2008; Pease and Brewer 2008) concentrates on the impact of celebrity endorsements on voter intentions, and uses large-scale quantitative analysis. A variant on these is provided by Erica Weintraub Austin and her colleagues (2008) who conclude that celebrity endorsements enhance the propensity of young people to vote and to engage with politics. Another strand looks at the impact of celebrities on news agendas (Thrall et al. 2008); a third is primarily concerned with the discourses deployed in Live8/Make Poverty History (Sireau and Davis 2007; Nash 2008).

While this research is valuable, it is worth noting a different approach, one that cuts across the quantitative/discourse analysis divide. This is the experimental work conducted by David Jackson and Thomas Darrow (2005; Jackson 2007). Working with Canadian and US students, their research explored whether celebrity endorsements made a difference to the willingness of participants to support a particular political cause or attitude, and how the character of the celebrity is itself a factor in this process. The results reveal just such a differential effect, with some stars having a much greater impact (Avril Lavigne) than others (Alanis Morissette) (Jackson and

Darrow 2005). Similar experimental work has been conducted in the UK, in part as a response to the North American dominance of the field, where variations were found in the impact of celebrities according to the political salience of respondents. As the authors (Veer et al. 2010, 445) conclude: 'celebrity endorsements can be effective in driving voter intention if politics is not salient for the eligible voter. However, if the voter is engaged with politics and is actively thinking of politics and political issues then the effect of celebrity endorsement is negated'.

Experimental research, with the opportunity it presents for controlling and introducing particular variables, allows us to penetrate further into the impact of celebrity politics. But such work does, of course, have disadvantages, not least the artificiality of the responses it is measuring. We do not know whether the results produced by experiments are played out in real political contexts. Nonetheless, such work does, at the very least, raise hypotheses that warrant further exploration. Furthermore, while such exploration might be conducted through quantitative analysis, there is a need for complementary qualitative work.

Work by Nick Couldry and his colleagues (Couldry and Markham 2007; Couldry et al. 2010) has helped to reinforce the findings of Veer and others that celebrity effects are most pronounced on the least politically engaged. Couldry et al.'s combination of survey, diary and interview research reveals considerable scope for doubt about the importance of celebrities to public political engagement. Similar results were found in research into young people's response to celebrities in the UK (Inthorn and Street 2011). These young people presented themselves as 'media savvy', and therefore as critical and sceptical readers of culture. In so doing they claimed to be unpersuaded by such figures as Bob Geldof or Bono. There were two exceptions to this general rule. First, where they judged the star to be 'authentic' in terms of both their artistic expression and political commitment, they would be taken seriously. The US hip hop artist Kanye West was a frequently cited example of this. The second exception was provided by those celebrities whose professional qualifications seemed to equip them with knowledge of 'how the world works'. Thus it was that some of our respondents would countenance the thought that Simon Cowell or Alan Sugar could credibly act as prime minister. These were seen as people who had a detailed understanding of the 'real world' and a proven track record of success. Even Jeremy Clarkson was proposed as a possible PM, although others, it should be added, regarded this particular suggestion with derision.

Such findings need, of course, to be treated with care. They suggest lines of inquiry, rather than providing robust conclusions. Nevertheless, they indicate, I would argue, an important future direction for research into celebrity politics. Apart from the country comparisons and the policy case studies, and apart too from the quantitative surveys and the experimentations, we also need to understand how individual citizens respond to and judge those who claim to be their representatives, whether this claim is based on political or cultural status.

Conclusion

This article offers several different answers to the question: 'does celebrity politics matter?' The first concerns its (potential) role within the policy process, where

drawing on evidence from New Labour it was possible to see celebrity politicians as players in the policy game. A second answer derived from how celebrity politicians might matter in theoretical accounts of contemporary politics. Here we saw the connections to be made to the politics of late modernity, albeit supplemented by an understanding of the associated media processes (and the distribution of symbolic capital). The limits to these accounts lay in the limits to the empirical evidence, and the need to expand the data to include comparative analysis and audience studies. The last section of the article pointed to the kind of answer that might be given here. Greater focus was needed, first, on comparative analysis that went beyond the traditional territories of the US and the UK, to encounter different systems and indeed different types of celebrity. Furthermore, there is a need for more research into the way in which citizens view and respond to celebrity politics. In summary, there are several senses in which celebrity politicians and celebrity politics might be seen to matter, but all of them need and deserve further research.

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Note

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