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Celebrities and Politics: The Donald “Trump” Effect

Valerie R. O’Regan Stephen J. Stambough  
California State University, Fullerton California State University, Fullerton  
[voregan@fullerton.edu](mailto:voregan@fullerton.edu) sstambough@fullerton.edu

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Celebrities and Politics: The Donald “Trump” Effect

The results of the 2016 presidential election demonstrate how celebrities are becoming more involved in politics and voters are willing to vote for celebrities for political office. In November 2016, celebrity Donald Trump became President Donald Trump after winning 306 of the Electoral College votes to Hillary Clinton’s 232 Electoral College votes. The candidate with no traditional political experience was now going to hold the top political office in the United States.

Well before the 2016 election, celebrities were active in the political world by running for political office as well as endorsing political candidates and issues. Some celebrities, such as Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Al Franken were successful in their bids for political office; others such as Clay Aiken, Cynthia Nixon and Shirley Temple Black were not. Besides those celebrities who sought a political office for themselves, others including Oprah Winfrey, Chuck Norris, Bono and Angelina Jolie have been politically involved through their endorsements of candidates and issues.

Even when elections are months away, celebrities find a way to get their political messages out to the public and this celebrity political activity seems to be increasing. However, do celebrities actually influence people’s opinions and decisions? This paper examines college students’ opinions about the influence of celebrity political endorsements, and explores the possibility that young adults are willing to vote for celebrities for political office. Additionally, by comparing the 2016 election, where one of the presidential candidates was a celebrity, to the 2012 election where there was not a celebrity presidential candidate, the paper examines if having a celebrity running for a prominent political office influenced the young adults’ opinions.

The effect of what celebrities say and do is assumed to be influential when it comes to informing young people about what is important in the world and which choices they should make. As a result, research on the impact of endorsements by celebrities typically focuses on young adults’ reactions. This assumption may be due to research emphasizing the media’s significance in politically socializing young adults (Chaffee and Kanihan 1997), and the influence of celebrity-admirer attachments in shaping identity development in young adults (Boon & Lomore 2001). It also could be due to the contention that there is a significant relationship between young people’s lives and the celebrity culture (Turner 2004; Inthorn & Street 2011), especially since being famous tends to be very important to young people (Jayson 2007). This can explain why this age group is typically used in this research. Another explanation for using this age group is the convenience of having classrooms of college students to survey. Whatever the reason, studies focus on young adults to analyze their responses to the endorsements and opinions of celebrities; hence, this research will follow the lead of this existing literature.

For this study, we address the following questions. Do young people perceive that average citizens listen to the political endorsements of celebrities? Do young respondents believe that average citizens are more likely to listen to celebrities’ political endorsements and opinions when there is a celebrity candidate on the ballot for a high-level political office? Does the source that young people use to gather their political information influence their perception of the power of celebrity political endorsements? Also, do young adults believe celebrities should run for political office, and would they vote for a celebrity for a political office? Finally, do the gender, ethnicity and partisan affiliation of young adults affect their perceptions of celebrity endorsements and their decisions to vote for a celebrity?

This research utilizes a questionnaire to gather information about respondents’ demographic information and perceptions of celebrity political endorsements, opinions and candidacies. The study begins with a review of the relevant literature providing a foundation for an analysis of the responses to the above mentioned questions. This is followed by an explanation of the current study and presentation of the results. Finally, the conclusion provides an explanation of the effect of celebrity endorsements and opinions, distinguishing between election years with and without a celebrity political candidate on the ballot. Suggestions for future research are also provided in the conclusion.

Literature Review

During election years and off-years, celebrity political opinions and activity are commonplace in the media. These identified celebrities share their political opinions with the public for the purpose of influencing the opinions of those who listen to them. Oftentimes these celebrities use their notoriety to persuade people to vote a certain way or support issues that are important to the celebrities such as ending conflicts, encouraging debt relief and protecting reproductive freedom or the environment.

As we examine the influence of celebrity political opinions and endorsements, the scholarship on celebrity endorsements in advertising provides a starting point for this research. The extensive advertising research has addressed the impact of celebrity endorsements of products on the opinions of consumers. Based on this scholarship, celebrities capture and hold consumers’ attention (Premeaux 2005; Premeaux 2009; Biswas et. al. 2009); they also improve the recall of the message they communicate (Friedman & Friedman 1979). Moreover, celebrities have a positive effect on consumers’ perceptions of products because consumers have a tendency to relate to celebrities (Byrne et. al. 2003) and believe what the celebrities say (Kamins et. al. 1989). However, some argue that to influence consumers, the celebrity endorser must be carefully chosen (Friedman & Friedman 1979) and be perceived to have some product expertise (Erdogan 1999; Amos et. al. 2008). Thus, celebrities’ endorsements seem to increase the likelihood that consumers will choose the endorsed product (Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamins et. al. 1989; Heath et. al. 1994).

Although this research focuses on the advertising of products, it is a foundation for the current study of the effect of celebrity political endorsements on young adults. This is important because the literature on the impact of celebrity political endorsements on young people is relatively limited (Jackson 2007). As we look at the studies that analyze the effect of celebrity political endorsements, we find research examining the impact of celebrity endorsements on youth voting (Wood and Herbst 2007; Austin et. al. 2008). These studies argue that the impact of celebrities on motivating young people’s voting behavior is mixed. Young people are motivated by celebrities to become informed and participate (Austin et. al. 2008), but celebrities are not as influential on the voting behavior of first time voters as other individuals, such as family members and significant others may be (Wood and Herbst 2007).

Quasi-experimental approaches have been used to examine the impact of celebrity political beliefs and endorsements on the political attitudes of college students (Jackson and Darrow 2005; Jackson 2007). In their study of Canadian college students, Jackson and Darrow found that celebrity endorsements reinforced some of the political opinions that young people have; they also make unpopular statements more acceptable (2005). Jackson’s study of U.S. college students concluded that celebrities have a positive impact on young adults’ attitudes whereby the likelihood that the young people will agree with a political position increases if a celebrity endorses it (2007). Both studies emphasize that the celebrity must be a credible and appropriate source of information.

Additionally, research has utilized the experimental method to determine the effect of celebrity endorsements on the presidential candidate choices of college students and young adults’ views about political parties, as well as the influence of celebrity endorsements on the emotions of voters. Kaye Usry and Michael Cobb (2010) employed a pretest to define the term “celebrity” and measure the traits of the celebrities that were chosen for the study. Usry and Cobb followed the pretest with two experiments to measure the effect of the chosen celebrities’ endorsements. Both experiments found that celebrity endorsements do not benefit candidates, and in fact, hurt the candidates at certain times.

The experimental method was also used by Anthony Nownes (2012, 2017). In the 2012 study, Nownes examined the impact of celebrity political activity on young adults’ attitudes about political parties. His study found the political activity of celebrities can influence young adults’ opinions about political parties as well as their opinions about the celebrities. For his 2017 research, Nownes focused on the impact of celebrity endorsements on voter emotions. Here he found that endorsements by celebrities decreased negative emotions toward Hillary Clinton; however, the endorsements did not impact positive emotions toward the candidate.

Another use of the experimental method was to examine the effect of different versions of a news story describing political endorsements made by celebrities on voting attitudes, assessments of the credibility of candidates and voting intentions (Morin et. al. 2012). Although this study attempted to expand our understanding of the impact of endorser credibility and sex on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of voters, no influence was found.

Limitations of these methods must be considered as we examine the studies’ results. While the quasi-experimental design allows the researchers to focus the respondents’ attention on specific celebrities’ endorsements, the choice of who is labeled as a celebrity is not made by the respondents. In both of the previously mentioned studies (Jackson and Darrow 2005; Jackson 2007), the authors chose three specific celebrities and evaluated the students’ responses to statements made by the celebrities. In other words, the authors, not the respondents, determined who was a celebrity and this may influence the results based on the difference between who the authors and the respondents viewed to be a celebrity.

The same can be said for the experimental design used in the Usry and Cobb research (2010). Even though the authors initially evaluate twenty-two celebrities, the candidate endorsements of only four celebrities are analyzed during the two experiments (two per experiment). As is the complaint with the quasi-experimental design, the results may be influenced by the four chosen celebrities. We don’t know if the endorsements of other celebrities from the initial list may have been more persuasive and beneficial for the candidates. Similarly, Anthony Nownes’ 2012 study utilized two celebrities chosen by the author in the posttest. Once again, the author’s choice of celebrities could have influenced the results of this study.

In addition to analyzing the potential celebrity influence on young people’s political attitudes and behavior, others have focused on perceived celebrity influence. Jennifer Brubaker employed third-person effects theory and utilized results from surveys that were administered to college students to determine if respondents were influenced by celebrities’ endorsements during the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections. Brubaker found that the respondents were more likely to believe that the celebrity influence was greater on other people than on themselves (2011). However, the lack of ethnic diversity in the study’s sample and the potential that students may have responded more than once to the survey could have influenced the results.

Using focus groups, Gwendelyn Nisbett and Christina Childs DeWalt found similar results. Based on the responses from eight focus groups, the student participants argued the perceived celebrity influence was stronger on others than on themselves (2016). The fact that the authors did not find first-person effects—where respondents perceive an effect on themselves—supports the findings of Usry and Cobb (2010) and Wood and Herbst (2007). However, because of the small sample size of 30 utilized in the Nisbett and DeWalt study, we must consider these results with caution.

Examining the reasons why citizens respond the way they do to celebrity politics, Inthorn and Street (2011) utilized thirteen focus groups and twenty-six in-depth interviews to assess the opinions of young adults in the United Kingdom. As these and other scholars (Jackson and Darrow 2005; Jackson 2018) warn, all celebrities are not equal. The credibility, respect and favorability associated with certain celebrities must be considered as we analyze the potential celebrity impact on people’s attitudes and decisions. Again, based on this methodology, we must be cautious in generalizing about the effect celebrities can have on young people’s opinions. By limiting the data gathering to thirteen focus groups and twenty-six interviews, and by having a homogeneous sample of white, middle class young adults, the results do not lend themselves to generalizing about the impact of celebrity endorsements on young people’s opinions in the United Kingdom. Due to the limits of the extant literature, we must expand our research methodologically and demographically to provide support for the results that have been found or to correct for their shortcomings. This leads us to the current study.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if young, college-aged adults believe that average citizens are more likely to trust and listen to celebrity political endorsements than to the political endorsements from others. Additionally, a comparison is made between the election cycle before the 2012 presidential election and the cycle before the 2016 presidential election when one of the presidential candidates was a celebrity. Did Donald Trump’s celebrity status influence young adults’ general perceptions of celebrity political endorsements? First, we need to clarify what is considered a celebrity. Even though a celebrity is usually defined as a “famous person”, this study chooses to be more specific in its definition to avoid ambiguity. Thus, the definition of a celebrity is a person who is known as an actor, actress, comedian, singer, musician, talk show host or athlete (O’Regan 2014). For this study, Donald Trump is considered a celebrity based on the media’s perception of Trump. According to Conor Friedersdorf, real estate developer Trump became a celebrity and “household name” following the numerous television interviews with him on programs such as CBS 60 Minutes, the Oprah Winfrey Show and Late Night with David Letterman (2016). Furthermore, IMDb, the Internet Movie Database, known as “the most comprehensive movie database on the Web”, lists Trump as an actor on various programs playing “himself”. Therefore, classifying Trump as a celebrity fits our definition.

As mentioned earlier, this research employs a questionnaire that was administered in sixteen lower-division American Politics classes at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). Seven of the classes were conducted during the fall 2011 semester, two were held in spring 2012, two took place in the fall 2012 semester, two were held in spring 2016 and three were conducted during the fall 2016 semester. The American Politics classes were chosen because all students who graduate from a California State University are required to complete a general education American Institutions course which this course fulfills. Also, by choosing this course the chances that the students would complete the questionnaire more than once are unlikely.

Additionally, by utilizing these sixteen classes, data was acquired from a diverse group of students including various grade levels (entry-level to senior-level) and a variety of university majors. During the 2012 election cycle, student respondents represented the following college majors: 21% were from the Humanities and Social Sciences, 18.5% were in the College of Business and Economics, 17% were from the Health and Human Development College and 12% were in the College of Communications. The remainder of the majors were either undeclared (9%) or in the Colleges of Natural Science and Math (9%), Arts, (7%) or Engineering/Computer Science (6.5%). For the 2016 election cycle, the respondents’ college majors were 22.5% from the Humanities and Social Sciences, 20% from the College of Business and Economics, 17% from the College of Engineering/Computer Science, 14% from the Health and Human Development College and the rest of the majors were from the Colleges of Natural Science and Math (8.5%), Arts (7%), Communications (6%) or undeclared (5%).

Furthermore, the sample of 1513 for the 2012 election cycle and 587 for the 2016 election cycle represents the university’s ethnic diversity. For the 2012 cycle, 32% of the student respondents identified as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 31% identified as White/Anglo/Caucasian, 24% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and the remainder either Black/African-American (3%) or other (10%). The self-identified ethnicity of student respondents during the 2016 election cycle are as follows: 45% identified as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 24.5% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 18.5% as White/Anglo/Caucasian, and again the remainder identified as either Black/African-American (2%) or other (10%). Because the sample for this study is ethnically diverse in comparison to the earlier research, the results may differ from the earlier studies **(**Pease & Brewer 2008; Usry & Cobb 2010; Inthorn & Street 2011) as we identify attitudinal differences that may be due to student ethnicity.

Our sample also represented the students’ political diversity. For the 2012 election 37.6% of the students identified themselves as Democrats, 22% identified with the Republican Party, 22% identified themselves as Independents and the remainder classified as other. During the 2016 election cycle, the students skewed more heavily to the Democratic Party and away from the ranks of the Independents. Roughly 55% identified as Democrats while only 11% identified as Independent with another 11% identifying as other. The percentage of the sample that identified as Republican was identical (22%) to what was found in 2012. Finally, there were more female students than male students in the 2012 sample with 59% female and 41% male respondents. The numbers in 2016 were similar with a slightly more male sample (55% female and 45% male). Our questionnaire included questions on sources of political information, attitudes regarding celebrities’ endorsements and candidacies, attitudes about political relevance of celebrities and demographic information about the respondents. A variable to distinguish the two election cycles from each other is included to determine if a celebrity presidential candidate affected the respondents’ answers to the questions.

The sample’s diversity allows us to examine attitudinal differences about celebrity endorsements that may be influenced by the gender, ethnicity or partisanship of the respondents. We can also determine if having a celebrity candidate in the race impacts these attitudinal differences. Literature from the advertising field provides justifications for expecting gender and ethnic attitudinal differences. From the research examining gender attitudes about celebrity product endorsements, we discover mixed findings. Some contend that women are more likely to be influenced by celebrities than men are (Bush et. al. 2004; Premeaux 2005; Premeaux 2009), and others argue that women are less likely than men to be influenced by celebrity endorsements (Bashford 2001). Still others find no difference between women’s and men’s attitudes about celebrities’ endorsements (Dix et. al. 2010).

Unfortunately, the research is limited when considering the effect of respondents’ ethnicity on their perception of celebrity endorsements. A few scholars have examined the ethnic identity connection between participant responses to advertisements and the characters or models in the advertisements (Appiah 2001; Whittler & Spira 2002). More to the point, studies have examined the use of African American and Latino celebrities to endorse products for African American and Latino consumers (Khermouch 1999; Alleyne 2002; Wentz 2002) with the expectation that a shared ethnic identity between consumers and celebrity endorsers will result in a positive assessment of advertised products. Others analyze the advertising practices that target Asian Americans (Morimoto & La Ferle 2005) again looking for a positive connection between consumers and advertising stimuli based on their shared ethnicity. According to these findings, the importance of considering the ethnicity of consumers in developing advertising strategies is stressed and these studies justify the expectation that respondent ethnicity may influence respondent attitudes about celebrities and their endorsements.

When it comes to the relationship between party identification and perceptions of celebrity political endorsements, partisan differences have been documented in public opinion polls. According to the Harris Poll, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that celebrities have a positive effect politically (55% vs. 36%). Besides the two main parties, over half of the Independents (57%) stated that celebrities have little or no effect on the political issues they promote (Harris Interactive 2008). Furthermore, polling done by CBS News found that 69% of Republican respondents stated that celebrities should not get involved in politics in comparison to only 33% of Democratic respondents. In this same poll, women are found to be more supportive of celebrity political involvement than men are (56% vs. 36%) supporting some of the findings in the advertising literature (CBS News/New York Times 2007). Based on these results, we can expect to find differences in attitudes about celebrities that can be attributed to the partisanship and the gender of the respondents in the study.

In addition, this research considers the source that young people use to gather their political information suggesting that certain sources, such as the Internet, may influence young people’s perceptions of celebrity political endorsements. According to Weaver Lariscy et. al., young people, who are known as digital natives, use the Internet and other online applications for political information more than other age groups do (2011). Thus, we expect to find a positive relationship between this control variable and the main dependent variables.

Finally, this study addresses the possibility that young adults’ perceptions of people listening to celebrity endorsements may be different when a celebrity is one of the main candidates in the election. As was mentioned earlier, Donald Trump is viewed as a celebrity. Since most citizens are fans of celebrities and the status of being a celebrity enhances the famous person’s political and rhetorical opportunities (Kuehl 2010), we expect more interest in celebrities’ endorsements and an increased willingness to vote for a celebrity in 2016 when there was a celebrity on the ballot.

Research Questions

Throughout campaigns the media is saturated with various celebrities endorsing a political candidate or advocating for specific issues. As we see more celebrities being involved in politics, we can deduce that “someone” believes associating celebrities with a candidate or an issue can be beneficial. It is also believed that celebrities are informed about political candidates and issues; some might argue that they are more informed than politicians and experts are. Examples of celebrities’ commitment to specific political candidates include Oprah Winfrey’s support for Barack Obama and Chuck Norris’ endorsement of Mike Huckabee. Moreover, evidence of celebrities’ knowledge and commitment to political issues includes Angelina Jolie’s advocacy for international children’s rights and Bono’s campaign to end world poverty.

For the first two research questions we explore the influence that celebrities have on the general public. Specifically, we examine the perception that the general public trusts celebrities on what they have to say about political issues more than they trust politicians or political experts such as scientists or academics. Therefore, the research questions are:

*Q1:*  Do young adults perceive average citizens to be more likely to listen to a celebrity than a politician about political issues?

*Q2*: Do young adults perceive average citizens to be more likely to listen to a celebrity than an expert, scientist or academic about political issues?

For both questions, the respondent gender, ethnicity and partisanship and the source of information will be considered to see their effects on respondents’ trust in celebrities regarding political issues. In particular, we are interested in the differences between the 2012 and 2016 election cycles based upon the Trump candidacy in 2016. As discussed earlier, Republicans traditionally were less likely than Democrats to believe celebrities had a role in politics. Because a celebrity won the Republican nomination, we expect different results between 2012 and 2016 based on respondent partisanship and possibly, based upon demographic groups that were more directly and publically in opposition to the Trump campaign due to the high profile nature of women’s issues and immigration issues during the campaign.

The potential power of celebrity endorsements is only one focus of this study. We can argue that the more direct influence of celebrities on politics occurs when celebrities run for political office. Therefore, we also explore whether people believe celebrities should run for political office and whether they are willing to vote for a celebrity. As with the questions about the power of celebrity endorsements, we examine respondent gender, ethnicity, partisanship, and use of the Internet as predictors of whether someone believes celebrities should run for office and the willingness to vote for a celebrity. As mentioned before, because of the Trump effect in 2016, we expect the 2012 and 2016 results to differ based upon partisanship, and perhaps demographics, with Republicans more willing to be supportive of celebrity candidates in 2016, and for certain demographic groups to be less supportive based upon the divisive nature of the campaign regarding women’s issues and immigration.

Therefore, to explore questions about support for celebrity candidacies we consider the following research questions.

*Q3*: Are there partisan and demographic differences in the belief that celebrities should not run for office as a result of the 2016 Republican presidential candidacy of a celebrity?

*Q4*: Are there partisan and demographic differences in the willingness to vote for a celebrity for political office as a result of the 2016 Republican presidential candidacy of a celebrity?

Results

To address these questions, we examined the frequency tables produced for each dependent variable and conducted regression analyses on questions about the endorsement power of celebrities. For the questions about celebrities as candidates including the voting question, we conducted a direct comparison of 2012 and 2016 with both bivariate and multivariate analyses for the dichotomous variable of vote choice, and for the scale measuring support for celebrities running for office.

As discussed earlier, we are interested in how young adults perceive the impact of celebrities on politics for others. To analyze this, we examine whether young adults believe that other citizens listen to political information from celebrities more than they listen to politicians. We then modify the statement to determine if citizens are more likely to listen to celebrities for political information than to experts, scientists or academics.

In order to determine if certain types of young people are more or less likely to agree with these statements, we conducted regression analyses for each using the following equations:

*Perception that others believe celebrities more than politicians = Democrat + Republican + Black/African American + Hispanic/Latino/Chicano + Asian/Pacific Islander + Internet as Source of Information**+ Women*

*Perception that others believe celebrities more than political experts = Democrat + Republican + Black/African American + Hispanic/Latino/Chicano + Asian/Pacific Islander + Internet as Source of Information**+ Women*

The partisan variables Democrat and Republican are included as dichotomous variables leaving Independents as the omitted comparison group. For the ethnicity variables, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, and Asian/Pacific Islander are included in the same manner leaving White/Anglo/Caucasian as the omitted comparison group. **T**he variable measuring reliance on the Internet as a source of information is measured on a 0-3 additive scale with a value of 1 added for each of the following sources of information identified as a source the respondent uses: (1) Internet News Sources, (2) Social Media, and (3) Internet Blogs. A gender variable is included whereby men are the omitted comparison category. Finally, the dependent variable is the belief about celebrity endorsements coded on a 1-5 scale with greater values indicating a stronger belief that others listen to celebrities more than they listen to either politicians or political experts.

In both 2012 and 2016, young people tend to believe that average citizens listen to celebrities about political issues more than they listen to politicians. The data presented in Table 1 suggest this finding with both the median and modal categories indicating that young adults agree with this statement in each year. In fact, the frequency table for each year is almost identical for all categories.

This does not, however, mean that there was no Trump effect for certain groups within the sample. In order to determine what type of young adults are more likely to believe this, we conducted a regression analysis. These results, reported in Table 2, suggest differences in the two election years for three groups: Democrats, Hispanics/Latinos/Chicanos, and women. In 2012, the only variable that achieved an acceptable level of statistical significance was women with women being less likely than men to believe that others trust celebrities more than politicians. By 2016, that finding was no longer statistically significant. Conversely, the 2016 data suggest that Hispanic/Latino/Chicano respondents were now more likely to believe that others relied upon celebrities more than politicians for political information, while Democrats were less likely to do so.

The results for the statement about whether young adults believe other citizens are more likely to listen to celebrities about political issues than to political experts including academics and scientists suggest similar findings. The distribution in Table 3 is very similar to Table 1 with the same median and modal categories but with slightly more distribution in the disagree category in Table 3 than in Table 1. Again, there were no significant differences between the 2012 and 2016 results. The results of the regression analysis (see Table 4) find a similar relationship for the gender of the respondent variable with women less likely to believe the statement than men were in 2012, but that the effect of gender disappeared in 2016. The results are also similar with respect to Hispanics/Latinos/Chicanos with a significant and positive relationship found in 2016 but no relationship in 2012. Unlike the results for the previous research question, no effect is found for the Democratic variable in either year. In addition, for both 2012 and 2016 there is a statistically significant result for the variable “Black/African American” suggesting that respondents who identify as Black/African-American were more likely to believe that others trusted celebrities more than experts.

Belief about influence is one thing but celebrities actually running for and winning office is something else. Table 5 shows the results of a simple chi2 test comparing 2012 and 2016 on the question of whether celebrities should run for office. The results reported in Table 5 suggest a slight but statistically significant difference between 2012 and 2016 concerning the belief that celebrities *should not* run for office. By 2016, some of the opposition to the idea of celebrity candidacies declined so we looked at a multivariate analysis to explore the types of young people who might have different views as a result of the Trump effect. The results of the regression analysis on this question are found in Table 6.

These results suggest several differences in support for celebrity candidacies by demographic groups in the different years. Perhaps the most noticeable difference is that in 2012, Republican students were much more likely to agree that celebrities should not run for political office, but by 2016 Republican opposition to celebrity candidacies disappeared. This is not surprising given the Trump candidacy. For other groups, the results for women and Hispanics/Latinos/Chicanos were consistent across the years with both groups in agreement that celebrities should not run for office. In addition, there was a change in the opposition to celebrity candidates among those who use the Internet as the primary source of political information.

Finally, we looked at the question of whether someone was willing to vote for a celebrity for office. These results are presented in Table 7. Again, the primary Trump effect seems to be with Republicans. By 2016, Republicans were willing to vote for a celebrity for political office. Further, the impact of ethnicity is interesting. In 2012, the results for both the Hispanic/Latino/Chicano and Asian/Pacific Islander variables suggest that these groups were less likely to vote for celebrities than White/Caucasian students. By 2016, these findings no longer held. The gender variable attained statistical significance in both years with women less likely than men to vote for celebrities. It is interesting to note that the gendered dynamics of the 2016 election, with the first female presidential candidate and a celebrity candidate who was often criticized for misogynistic rhetoric, did not appear to alter the difference between men and women in their likelihood of voting for a celebrity candidate.

Conclusion

From these results, we see that young adults believe that other people are more likely to listen to a celebrity for political information than to a politician, expert, scientist, or academic. We also find differences between the two election cycles suggesting a Trump effect during the 2016 cycle. In particular, we find partisan differences in the two cycles attributed to Republicans being more likely to vote for a celebrity in an election in which their party nominated a celebrity.

In addition, we find gender differences as far as respondents’ perceptions of how much average citizens listen to celebrities when it comes to political issues. Also, we find differences in attitudes based on the ethnicity and partisanship of the respondents. Furthermore, this study provides evidence supporting Jennifer Brubaker’s contention that college students view celebrity endorsements as having third-person effects rather than first person effects.

As for the belief that celebrities should not run for political office, there is a slight but significant decline in the opposition to celebrities running for office between the two election cycles. This suggests an effect associated with Donald Trump being on the ballot resulting in a greater acceptance of celebrities seeking political office. According to our analysis, most of the difference was a change in the attitudes of Republicans who, by 2016, were no longer opposed to celebrities running for political office. Thus, our fourth analysis suggests that as a result of the 2016 Trump campaign, several groups are more likely to vote for a celebrity, most notably Republicans.

From these results we can determine that using celebrities to convey messages to the public is successful because people are more likely to listen to them than to others, even though the others may have more expertise. However, this is an analysis of young adults’ perceptions in California; we must be careful in generalizing these results to the general population.

A future project focusing on the ethnicity differences found in this research is to compare the ethnicity of the respondents to the ethnicity of celebrities who are viewed as trustworthy and knowledgeable. Based on earlier mentioned findings in the advertisement literature (Alleyne 2002; Wentz 2002), we can surmise that young adults may be more likely to trust and listen to political information from celebrities who share the same ethnicity that they do. This research can further help us understand the influence that celebrities have in the political world. Another future project will be to consider the preferred media that young adults use to obtain their political information. This project is especially timely considering Donald Trump’s regular use of Twitter to communicate with the public.

As more celebrities become politically involved, whether through endorsing political issues and candidates, or running for political office themselves, we need to understand this interesting and potentially significant link between celebrity status and the political world. From what we have seen, “Poliwood” which is the intersection of politics and Hollywood, is here to stay.

Table 1: Belief that Average Citizens are More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Politicians about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | 2016 Election Cycle |
| Strongly Agree | 17.89% | 18.18% |
| Agree | 54.12% | 53.87% |
| Neutral | 18.22% | 19.53% |
| Disagree | 8.58% | 7.24% |
| Strongly Disagree | 1.20% | 1.18% |

2012: N = 1504; Median = Agree; Mode = Agree

2016: N = 594; Median = Agree; Mode= Agree

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Types of Young Adults Who Believe Average Citizens are More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Politicians about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | | 2016 Election Cycle | |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |
| Democrat | -0.043 | 0.057 | -0.209 | 0.079\*\* |
| Republican | -0.066 | 0.066 | 0.091 | 0.126 |
| Black/African American | 0.089 | 0.175 | 0.331 | 0.182 |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 0.014 | 0.060 | 0.319 | 0.093\*\* |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | -0.118 | 0.064 | 0.154 | 0.098 |
| Internet as Source of Information | 0.031 | 0.031 | 0.054 | 0.050 |
| Women | -0.148 | 0.050\*\* | -0.088 | 0.073 |
| Constant | 3.88 | 0.067\*\* |  |  |

2012: N = 1269. Prob > F = 0.029; R-squared = 0.01

2016: N = 564. Prob > F = 0.004; R-squared = 0.04

* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

Table 3. Belief that Average Citizens are More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Academics/Experts/Scientists about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | 2016 Election Cycle |
| Strongly Agree | 12.84% | 9.93% |
| Agree | 38.92% | 42.76% |
| Neutral | 22.025 | 22.39% |
| Disagree | 21.62% | 20.03% |
| Strongly Disagree | 4.59% | 4.88% |

2012: N = 1503; Median = Agree; Mode = Agree

2016: N = 594; Median = Agree; Mode= Agree

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Types of Young Adults Who Believe Average Citizens are More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Academics/Experts/Scientists about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | | 2016 Election Cycle | |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |
| Democrat | -0.076 | 0.069 | -0.127 | 0.096 |
| Republican | -0.112 | 0.084 | 0.008 | 0.164 |
| Black/African American | 0.419 | 0.199\* | 0.661 | 0.295\* |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 0.086 | 0.074 | 0.335 | 0.113\*\* |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | -0.070 | 0.079 | -0.058 | 0.123 |
| Internet as Source of Information | 0.014 | 0.037 | 0.029 | 0.057 |
| Women | -0.161 | 0.063\* | 0.017 | 0.091 |
| Constant | 3.432 | 0.087\*\* | 3.198 | 0.147\*\* |

2012: N = 1268. Prob > F = 0.028; R-squared = 0.01

2016: N = 564. Prob > F = 0.008; R-squared = 0.03

* \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

Table 5: Belief that Celebrities Should Not Run for Office.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total |
| 2012 Election Cycle | 17.13% | 21.60% | 38.33% | 19.13% | 3.80% | 100%  (1500) |
| 2016 Election Cycle | 12.29% | 21.54% | 40.40% | 18.58% | 3.72% | 100%  (594) |

Pearson chi2(4) = 12.902; Pr = 0.012

Table 6: Regression Analysis of Belief that Celebrities Should Not Run for Office.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | | 2016 Election Cycle | |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |
| Democrat | 0.077 | 0.068 | 0.046 | 0.091 |
| Republican | 0.167 | 0.080\* | -0.103 | 0.161 |
| Black/African American | 0.288 | 0.202 | -0.053 | 0.327 |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 0.312 | 0.074\*\* | 0.212 | 0.101\* |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 0.144 | 0.075 | 0.001 | 0.117 |
| Internet as Source of Information | -0.075 | 0.037\* | 0.016 | 0.054 |
| Women | 0.236 | 0.062\*\* | 0.339 | 0.084\*\* |
| Constant | 3.031 | 0.088\*\* | 2.911 | 0.126\*\* |

2012: N = 1264. Prob > F = 0.000; R-squared = 0.04

2016: N = 564. Prob > F = 0.001; R-squared = 0.05

\* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

Table 7: Logistic Regression Analysis of Whether Respondent Would Vote for a Celebrity.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2012 Election Cycle | | 2016 Election Cycle | |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |
| Democrat | -0.090 | 0.148 | 0.042 | 0.224 |
| Republican | -0.268 | 0.169 | 0.766 | 0.322\* |
| Black/African American | -0.371 | 0.403 | 0.744 | 0.692 |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | -0.832 | 0.159\*\* | -0.307 | 0.235 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | -0.655 | 0.164\*\* | -0.316 | 0.274 |
| Internet as Source of Information | 0.211 | 0.081\*\* | 0.007 | 0.133 |
| Women | -0.418 | 0.130\*\* | -0.567 | 0.202\*\* |
| Constant | -0.518 | 0.179\*\* | -0.730 | 0.318 |

2012: N = 1266. Wald chi2(7) = 52.13. Prob > chi2 = 0.00.

2016: N = 564. Wald chi2(7) = 21.42. Prob > chi2 = 0.00.

* \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

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