

Politics, Celebrities, and the Entertainment Industry: An In-Depth Discussion.

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Do celebrities within the entertainment industry influence politics?

If so, why does this matter?

As people within contemporary society, we are more or less familiar with celebrities across a multitude of entertainment platforms. There are those with a social media following ranging between the ten-thousands into the millions. Other individuals have gained their fame via their participation in television and movie content, or perhaps song and dance. The variety of ways a person can gain overnight stardom can grant an individual something that has an impact on the lifestyles and decisions of those not placed upon such a pedestal— *influence*. As I work through my thesis, I wish to focus my research on the central question of, “Do celebrities within the entertainment industry influence politics?” And if so, “What kinds of influence do celebrities and entertainers have on politics?” Did the op-ed piece, written by movie star and filmmaker George Clooney, on President Biden needing to take a step back from the presidential election and give way for a newer, younger face for the Democratic party actually push party members to make a change? Or maybe this was one of many instances where celebrities use their platform to take a stance on an issue or topic, knowing that their sole being would draw attention to the matter at hand.

I would also like to touch on how complex a celebrity endorsement can be, and eventually will delve deeper into this point later on. With enough passion and drive, and maybe a bit of money, a famous individual can bend the ears of their fans to pay attention to a social issue or an upcoming election. However, there is also a risk of losing the attention that the celebrity figure is meant to bring in altogether via the, “Vampire Effect,” (Veltman, 2024), which suggests that an influential person may simply suck up all of the attention that was intended to be given to

the political candidate or social issues at hand. Is it possible that a celebrity can simply take away the focus from a political candidate that they were meant to endorse in the first place?

This topic and question are particularly relevant to this year, as the effects of the 2024 presidential election are looming. The evidence of past celebrity endorsements, alongside celebrities speaking out about policies, issues, or country-wide topics of debate, will be analyzed throughout this academic piece. I wish not only to make known a few of many famous faces that have engaged in our democracy, but also question their stances and showcase the impact of their speaking out on our country's politics and politicians. I believe that moving forward, those who read this piece will be much more careful with whom they choose to outwardly admire in the entertainment industry, and may also gain perspective on why one with a platform should be cautious of the stances they take.

Literature Review and Theory

Past Celebrity Influence, Campaign Effects, and Voter Choice

The first source that has been pulled in relation to this thesis is in reference to celebrity endorsements and politics (Mishra & Mishra, 2014). The researchers within this journal brought indirect examples of endorsements from past presidential elections, including the infamous 2008 race to the White House between former President Barack Obama (D) and the late Senator John McCain (R). George Clooney is referenced in this journal as a major celebrity supporting the Obama campaign during this period, and McCain's campaign received a custom country song by singer Hank Williams Jr. (Mishra & Mishra, 2014). The researchers here further build upon the idea that political parties are, in some ways, like a brand. To have a familiar face of a celebrity or well-known figure at the front of supporters behind a specific political party draws attention to

that specific campaign. Other methods used throughout this journal to gain information included quite a few hypotheses, ranging from, “*H1: The credibility of a celebrity endorser will positively impact the credibility of the endorsed political brand,*” to, “*H6: The relationship between endorser credibility and political brand credibility will vary according to the type of celebrity (i.e., national or local) employed by the endorsed political brand,*” (Mishra & Mishra, 2014). The researchers further detailed their method of collection for data, with a survey questionnaire being given out to every fifth mall visitor at the two selected sites mentioned in the journal (Mishra & Mishra, 2014).

The second source that will be used within this thesis takes a look back at the 2004 presidential election between former president and incumbent at the time George W. Bush (R), and John Kerry (D) (Payne et al., 2007). The Democratic National Convention that was held preceding the election of that year hosted many celebrity faces, one in particular by the name of Benjamin McKenzie, an actor from the television series, “*The O.C.*,” who spoke to the hearts of young voters and encouraged them to take part in their democracy (Payne et al., 2007). Though former President Bush also used ‘celebrity’ endorsements or familiar political faces to help further his campaign, it worked out in his favor. The researchers within this journal sought to understand the influence of celebrity endorsement on young voters’ participation in democracy (Payne et al., 2007). By taking an analysis of youth voter turnout during that election year, as well as overall voter turnout and comparing those results to previous years, the question of whether or not celebrity endorsement pushed their own fans and supporters to the poles was explored.

Our next academic journal of focus discusses celebrity figures and their connection to politics on a global scale, as well the growing influence on the younger generation. Of course,

famous faces and their political endorsements are much more prominent in the United States, but I believe it is also important to take a look at how celebrities influence other country's political realms and bring attention to socioeconomic issues. This journal introduces the term, "mission creep," which refers to, "an organization of [an] industry's expansion beyond its original goals (Hyde, 2009)," (Choi & Berger, 2010). We can see evidence of this from both major political parties—employing celebrities to speak at their respective rallies and national conventions with the hopes of not only gaining the celebrity's vote, but also the votes from the fans of the celebrity in question. Going into the point that celebrities are increasingly influencing the younger generation within the 21st century (Choi & Berger, 2010), the attention that famous individuals are able to bring to social and political issues has become more evident over the years (Choi & Berger, 2010). Not just actors and actresses, but models, musicians, and those who typically may not play a role in politics of any kind tend to turn heads in the direction of the issue or topic once the celebrity chooses to say something (Choi & Berger, 2010). The journal cites model Christie Brinkley, who stated that if a model were to suddenly speak on a nuclear power plant, they would bring in a completely new audience to focus on (and possibly care about) the issue in connection to nuclear plants than if a scientist were to approach the public with a similar intent of raising awareness (Choi & Berger, 2010). I believe that this may assist me with proving that the celebrities involved in the political realm currently do have influence, to an extent, on politics and the outcomes we eventually see.

Measuring just how much celebrities can influence voter choice, and ultimately reveal the effectiveness of a celebrity endorsement is a point that will be further expanded upon throughout this paper. To assist with this a bit more, there is an academic article that assesses the results of an online survey administered to approximately 283 students at an American higher education

institution (Um, 2018). One of the first points brought up in this piece is that celebrity endorsements are usually sought after due to drum up, “greater press coverage and larger campaign donations,” (Um, 2018). In connection to one of the case studies that will be broken down later on in this paper, celebrity CEO of SpaceX and Tesla Elon Musk is an endorsement that has currently been holding up Donald Trump’s presidential campaign this year. His recent decision to create a new PAC (political action committee) and donate \$75-million towards efforts supporting Trump and his mission to the White House is one of the largest seen within this term’s presidential race (Lowell, 2024). Within this specific peer-reviewed essay, research they had found through another source revealed that, “first-time Democratic voters were significantly more receptive than were Republican counterparts to celebrities encouraging voter turnout. Their study findings also support the notion that use of celebrity endorsements encourages voter turnout,” (Um, 2018). This piece also introduces multiple different theories that may explain the effects and reasoning behind celebrity influence, including the, “third-party theory,” (Um, 2018) which seemingly states that people are more of the belief that messages in media hold more influential power over others as opposed to themselves. Working through the data collected from my administered survey to the Hartwick College community, I expect there to be responses that align with the third-party theory. People may not directly wish to admit that they have been influenced by someone or something else in their own decisions, but would rather state that the third-party figure has impacted a friend or family member in some way or another.

Oprah Winfrey’s Influence

Another academic journal further discussing a direct relationship between celebrity endorsements and political outcomes is found in a piece surrounding the 2008 presidential

election. Oprah Winfrey, famous television personality and host of, “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” not only endorsed former senator and president Barack Obama in 2007, but also campaigned for him in three states (Pease & Brewer, 2008). Though she was not the first major famous figure to endorse a political candidate, this was one of many instances where the support of a celebrity for a politician proved to work in the politician’s favor. With the vast number of people that were established fans of Winfrey’s– and a whopping 8.4 million viewers per day of her televised show at one point in time– the attention and support that Obama ultimately received from this endorsement was massive (Pease & Brewer, 2008). At the same time, this academic journal also includes research done on the effects of this particular celebrity endorsement, and gives us numbers that truly show us whether or not Oprah’s action affected the outcome of Obama’s campaign. There were other interesting points made within this piece in relation to, “information shortcuts,” (Pease & Brewer, 2008) used by voters who do not feel the need to do their own research, but rely on a shortcut-method to decide on whom to cast their vote. This point may also provide some form of an answer to my current thesis question.

There are more academic pieces of research that discuss specific instances of celebrity endorsements, as well as possible direct effects of said endorsements on the political figure they have chosen to support. Mentioned earlier within this paper, Oprah Winfrey played an influential role leading up to the 2008 presidential election. Researchers found that Oprah’s ability to influence her fans into purchasing consumer goods had the chance to translate into the political realm (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013), and even went as far as to say that, “23% of Democrats [said] that Winfrey’s endorsement would make them more likely to vote for Obama (Pew Research Center 2007),” (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013). Both authors of this academic piece ultimately collected their own data to look into the effects of Winfrey on Obama’s campaign, and

his election results thereafter. When measuring just how impactful Oprah Winfrey has been throughout her career, this academic piece noted that she had been named in Time magazine's, "list of the 100 most influential people six times— more than any other individual," (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013). Both journalists also conducted a statistical experiment in order to determine the measure of Oprah's influence, as well as the probability that a voter votes for Barack Obama given various factors deemed important during the 2008 Democratic primary (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013). Following the completion of these equations, there were even findings that suggested that, "[. . .] Winfrey's endorsement led some voters who disliked Winfrey to vote for a candidate other than Obama," (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013). The data found in this academic will be further analyzed with the central thesis question in mind.

Hypothesis or Theoretical Expectations:

Throughout the research process of this paper, the ultimate goal is to be able to pinpoint at least four specific cases of celebrity endorsements and a major action or change that has occurred following the pronounced support. The two current celebrity figures thus far that will be discussed in connection to Democratic presidential candidates in this paper include Hollywood actor and filmmaker George Clooney, and television personality Oprah Winfrey. Both have contributed to and influenced either current or past U.S. presidential and primary elections significantly, and are still very well-known faces within social media and pop culture. As for the Republican presidential candidates and their respective celebrity endorsements, the cases involved in this paper will look closer at Elon Musk. Their respective relationship to former president Donald Trump, along with their support for his presidential campaigns from the

past or the present, may likely yield some interesting insights to the effect that certain celebrities have upon those in whom they choose to support.

For the results of this research, there is an expectation that celebrities and their endorsements would have shown some form of influence, whether it be positive or negative, for the candidate(s) in question. They can either yield a truth to one of two potential hypotheses:

H1: The influence from a celebrity or entertainment figure can be positive– meaning there is an increased voter turnout and an increase in votes geared towards a specific candidate.

H2: The influence from a celebrity or entertainment figure can be negative in the sense that the celebrity has not really moved the needle to pull in votes for the candidate, or has pulled attention away from the intended candidate altogether.

The reasoning behind the suggestion of the former hypothesis is this. There have been multiple successful presidential candidates who have secured their seat in the White House while working alongside a famous figure. The purpose of this paper would be then to break down their influence on the presidential candidate and their campaigns prior to elections, and observe just how much of a positive impact their involvement in the political realm truly had during a given time period. As for the latter hypothesis, I believe there is also the possibility that celebrities involving themselves or being asked to get involved with politics could also yield negative results. If there is an appearance, speech, or action performed that is unsuccessful or not received well by the public, there could be some form of backlash on both the celebrity and the politician. The politician could be at risk of losing voters, and the celebrity would risk losing their fan-base.

Methods

There will be two main methods used to either accept or reject the hypotheses that have been presented above. The first is to look at the four case studies and collect the results of each presidential candidate endorsed by a celebrity, as well as look at the ultimate race results following said endorsements. The main driver that solidified which celebrities were chosen as case studies was whether or not they had either campaigned with the candidate being endorsed, or were a major topic of discussion in connection to the candidate they had supported in some way. As stated previously, we will be focusing on two celebrities per majority political party candidates— George Clooney and Oprah Winfrey for Democratic presidential candidates, and Kanye West and Elon Musk for Republican presidential candidates.

The second piece of data that will be included here will be a study conducted by myself upon Hartwick College students and faculty. The goal of this second method is to pose a few questions to the Hartwick community that essentially ask the following— whether or not they have favorite celebrities or not, whether or not they have been keeping up with the upcoming presidential election, and whether or not one of the favorite celebrities could potentially influence their vote this November. The answers provided would help better determine if there may be any possible influence that people or voters receive from those famous faces that they may look up to on their personal political beliefs. Students and faculty from the ages of 18 and above would be asked to participate in the survey, and QR codes have been placed across campus in order to increase the visibility of the survey and its respective contributors.

Results

As a refresher for our central question, the goal of this research is to be able to determine if and how celebrities within the entertainment industry influence politics. The potential answers to this question have formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: The influence from a celebrity or entertainment figure can be positive— meaning there is an increased voter turnout and an increase in votes geared towards a specific candidate.

H2: The influence from a celebrity or entertainment figure can be negative in the sense that the celebrity has not effectively garnered attention meant for the intended candidate in a way that would be beneficial, or has pulled attention away from the intended candidate altogether.

To answer the question as to what a potential null hypothesis may look like regarding this research, there may be a chance that a celebrity or famous figure's endorsement upon a presidential candidate does not move the needle either way— meaning there isn't a positive or negative influence.

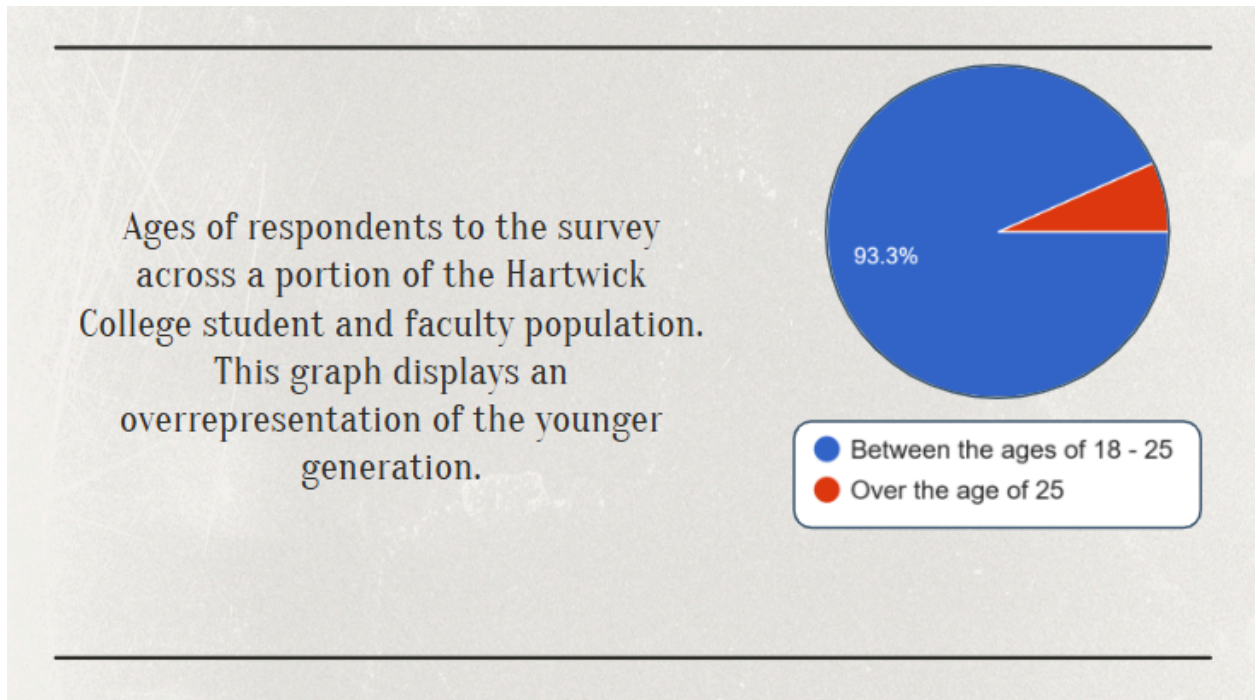
The Importance of Analyzing Celebrity and Entertainment Figures' Political Endorsements

I'd like to begin by going over the background on celebrity endorsements, as well as why it is important to analyze these endorsements from time to time. Those within the realm of fame, regardless of their level, hold some capacity of influence. As stated from an academic journal via the Wharton School of Business, "famous people are good at selling stuff," (Basiouny et al., 2023). In some cases, it doesn't really matter what it is they are advertising— so long as their fan base is listening and their attention is on both the celebrity and the product, the endorser has done their job. The executive director and senior fellow at the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative,

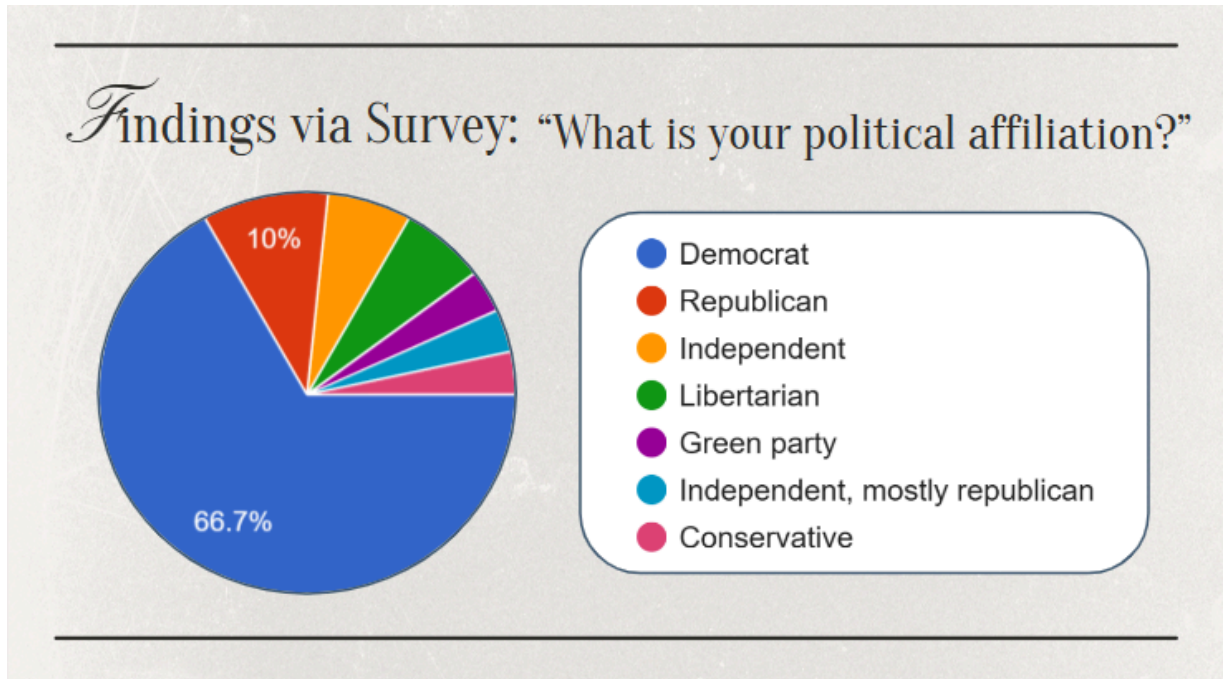
Elizabeth (Zab) Johnson, coined the phrase, “vampire-effect,”. This term was mentioned earlier in this thesis, but as a brief reminder, it is the theory that celebrities essentially suck away the attention from the product (or in this case, the politician) that they were meant to drive attention towards. From the business lens, “When a celebrity is featured in an ad, viewers tend to linger on the face of the famous person regardless of whether the star is gazing at the product or back at the viewer,” (Basiouny et al., 2023). Celebrities are effective in drawing attention to products, so it can be assumed that they would also have the same effect in drawing attention to important people. Audiences may cling to every word that a celebrity says at a political rally, regardless of their existing knowledge of the politician hosting the rally to begin with.

Results of the Survey Conducted on the Hartwick College Community

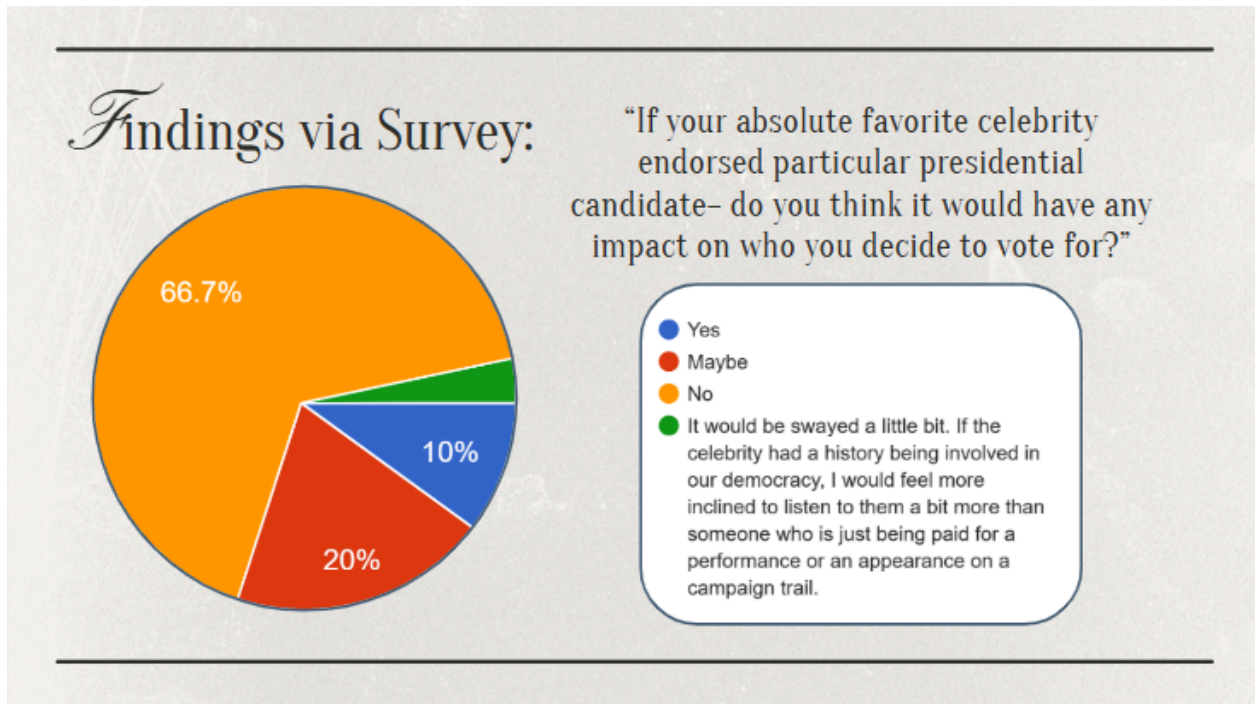
In my attempt to collect and analyze more personal data on whether or not people feel like celebrities influence the political realm, I went about constructing a short survey. I sent out this survey to the Hartwick College community via QR code that was placed across several academic buildings on the college campus. Upon reviewing the participants’ answers, there were a few interesting pieces of information revealed within the results. In total, there were about 30 respondents.



Majority were in between the ages of 18 and 25, and there was an overrepresentation of Democratic respondents as well.



The graph above displays survey results from 30 total respondents— 66.7% identified a Democrat, while the remaining percentage of participants were spread out amongst a variety of identifications. Only 10% of those who had engaged with this survey reported themselves as Republicans. 65% of those within that population of represented Democrats stated that they would not be swayed if their favorite celebrity were to endorse a particular political candidate. Out of the five Republican respondents, only 60% stated that they would not be swayed by a celebrity endorsement in a presidential election, while the remaining 40% stated that they might be swayed by the endorsement. Of that same population of Republican respondents, 20% said that they might be swayed by a celebrity endorsement. This data is relevant to what is being discussed throughout this project, despite there being an overrepresentation of one particular majority party. People may not explicitly want to admit that those whom they consume via media or television may have any influence on their political views at all. Thinking about it from a respondent's perspective, the issue might even be that people simply don't want others to know that they don't rely on research, but rather convenient information.



Those who had wished to be clear on their stance regarding their own favorite celebrities endorsing political figures had made their choice known in this survey as well. Similar to a number seen earlier, 66.7% of respondents indicated that they would not be swayed by the endorsement of celebrities towards a particular political candidate. The individual response from one participant indicated that they had the propensity to change their views on a presidential candidate if the celebrity endorsing the politician had a history of involvement in the political realm. This sole response, though it is the only one with a short response to this question, supports my central argument. Whether or not it is a direct influence on the public, celebrities do influence politics to some extent. The subconscious reflection on an entertainment figure's support of a particular candidate could result in the changing of a voter's mind on whom they wish to vote for and why.

Short-Response Answers from the Conducted Survey

Many of the participants in this survey chose to answer quite a few questions requiring no more than a paragraph asking to further detail their thoughts on celebrities talking about politics. The survey question that followed the results of the previous graph posed the following: “*Please explain your answer above– about why a celebrity endorsement would or would not influence your choice in a presidential election.*” Of the submitted responses to this question, a few had peaked my interest upon review. One individual had written that, “[The respondent] used to think that it would sway my opinion, but the other day one of my favorite wrestlers of all time endorsed a particular candidate that I do not support at all, and it ruined my perception of them. So no, I don’t think I’m influenced by celebrities.” Breaking down this response, this could tie back to the hypothesis that celebrities and their role in politics could yield a negative outcome. In this example, the respondent had once been a fan of a famous wrestling figure, and upon discovery of their political stances they decided to no longer support the wrestler. This case would reveal that the attempt to pull in and/ or attract a voter and supporter for the political candidate via the support of the wrestler gave way for backlash to both parties.

Another respondent had given the following answer. “Well, just because they [a given celebrity] like someone does not mean I have to, they are the ones probably being paid to endorse them.” The greater implications of this answer would support the latter hypothesis, as this participant from this survey was insinuating that celebrity endorsements are a money-grab. And yes, some politicians do pay celebrities and entertainers to make appearances on their respective campaign trails. Really, it may be difficult to prove against the assumption that both parties are in it to gain some type of profit. Celebrity endorsements, per this participant’s response, would leave a bad impression on both fans of the entertainment figure and voters considering the political candidate.

George Clooney & His Involvement in the Democratic Party

Delving deeper into the academic literature found on this topic, there are quite a few interesting points to touch on. First, the initial article that became the catalyst for this thesis topic— George Clooney and his op-ed letter to President Joe Biden. Upon first glance of any A-list celebrity, one may not assume that a two-time Oscar award winning figure could be so concerned with the state of our nation’s democracy. Known for films such as, “Gravity,” “Ocean’s Eight,” and appearing in the, “Spy Kids,” series, Clooney has been quite active in Hollywood. In early July of this year, famed actor and filmmaker George Clooney took to The New York Times to write an opinionated piece directed at the current President of the United States. After having had a not so great presidential candidate debate against former president Donald Trump, the public began to heavily turn their backs on President Joe Biden and his incumbent campaign. Prior to this article, there was not much knowledge on my end of Clooney’s involvement with the Democratic party, let alone politics. Yet his article conveyed the contrary— he cares quite a deal about the state of our democracy, as well as who is the face of the Democratic party in such a crucial election. Clooney begins his letter to the current president by emphasizing his pride in being a Democrat, as well as reminiscing on his financial contributions to past presidential campaigns— Barack Obama’s of 2012, Hillary Clinton’s in 2016, and President Biden’s campaign of 2020 (Clooney, 2024). As he continued to support the same Democratic incumbent in 2024, Clooney realized that the Joe Biden facing America today was not one of the same caliber seen in 2020 (Clooney, 2024). This same letter was used to amplify an unfortunate fact that the Democratic party had to face— that the entire political party was aware of Joe Biden’s aging as he progressed throughout his presidency (Clooney, 2024). Joe

Biden was no longer in a position to lead the Democratic party to success as he had done four years ago, and it was time to come to terms with this truth. George Clooney even made a prediction as to how this year's election would be, stating that, "We are not going to win in November with this president. On top of that, we won't win the House, and we're going to lose the Senate," (Clooney, 2024).

Clooney used the language of, "we," throughout the remaining portions of his letter when addressing the rest of the Democratic party. He reminded his fellow party members that they still had a shot to be on the ballot across the country. He stated that there was a group of strong Democrats who could even carry the party on the presidential ticket and go up against the, "revenge tour that Donald Trump calls a presidential campaign," (Clooney, 2024). The implied message here from George Clooney was evident. Clooney was suggesting that President Biden step down from running for president and make way for a younger face to take on the challenge of garnering America's trust. He makes a nod to the French and all the times that their country's leaders have stepped aside in an attempt to save their democracy, asserting that it is possible for a leftists leader to step down and lift up a stronger candidate to rival the right and their respective candidate. Clooney then ends his published piece by writing, "Joe Biden is a hero; he saved democracy in 2020. We need him to do it again in 2024," (Clooney, 2024). This was the statement that I believe sealed the deal for the Democratic party. The whole letter alone from such an influential celebrity figure— one who views politics and democracy within America thoughtfully, while continuing to manage his career in Hollywood— likely was seen as a call-to-action for those within the Biden administration. More importantly, it was a call out to President Biden himself to make a decision that would be a beneficial move in the long run. It

could even be argued that this letter led Democratic party officials and President Biden's right-hand workers to push for him to step down from the presidential race even more.

Oprah Winfrey & Her Role In The Political Realm

There are even more proofs found in past elections proving the first hypothesis of this essay to be true. Continuing to analyze celebrity influence on Democratic presidential candidates, we can now focus on the phenomenon that was, and still is Oprah Winfrey. Recognized for her daytime television self-titled show, as well as her appearances in numerous films over the years, Oprah Gail Winfrey became a household name following her rise to fame. Her career began to flourish following the introduction of her 1986 program, "The Oprah Winfrey Show," which featured interviews, unique and educational segments, and giveaways to her live show attendees. Winfrey's first step into politics came about prior to Barack Obama's official announcement of his run for president. Towards the mid-2000s, Obama was a U.S. Senator. His name was beginning to garner attention following his speech given at the Democratic National Convention of 2004. Then in May of 2007, Oprah went on to, "Larry King Live," announcing to the public that she would endorse Barack Obama for the upcoming presidential race (McDevitt, 2013). Within the same month, Winfrey took to hosting a fundraiser from her home in Malibu, California before joining Obama on his campaign trail in at least three states across the country (Pease & Brewer, 2008). Obama had only announced his candidacy in February of 2007, but by having the outward support of such an influential figure, his campaign ultimately became one of the most successful that the Democratic party had ever seen. Assessments of Winfrey's endorsement and its effectiveness in solidifying Obama's win have shown that Oprah was one of the major reasons why there was a large turnout in the first place

for the Democratic candidate. Winfrey's involvement with former president Barack Obama and his movement across his ultimately successful campaign trail was found to have, "had a positive effect on the votes Obama received, increasing the overall voter participation rate and the number of contributions received by Obama, and was responsible for about 1,000,000 additional votes for Obama," (Um, 2018).

Elon Musk's Turn at Influencing Politics

There may be some hesitation in classifying the Tesla, X, and SpaceX CEO known as Elon Musk as a celebrity. However, he has cemented his name in pop culture through his status as one of the world's richest people. Musk also holds his own acting credits via cameos, even hosting for the popular television show, "Saturday Night Live," in 2021 (Blystone, 2024). His success in being an entrepreneur and innovator began shortly after founding and then selling the infamous site, "Paypal," before taking over as Tesla's CEO in 2008 (Blystone, 2024). Despite only getting his U.S. citizenship in the early 2000s, Musk has taken quite a liking to participating in U.S. politics—specifically, he has grown to support members and ideals of the Republican Party. Initially, Musk had announced his support for presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy for the 2024 presidential election. Following his result in the Republican primary, Musk shifted his support to former president Donald Trump. Elon Musk's endorsement of Trump came only in July of 2024, and from there followed the support of his finances. Musk joined Trump as he campaigned through a variety of swing-states in the later months leading up to election night. Between July and October, Musk had fed approximately \$87 million dollars into Trump's campaign necessities (Al Jazeera, 2024). In order to effectively get that much money into the

political playing field, Musk created his own political action committee with the intent to, “support the core values that I believe in,” (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Former president Trump had been the victim of a failed assassination attempt earlier within the 2024 year. The shooting had taken place in Butler, Pennsylvania, and Trump had taken to his survival as a means to further push his message for the success of his campaign. Elon Musk trailed not too far behind Trump as he attacked the campaign trail yet again, making another stop in Butler to finish the rally he had started. As he took to the stage at a Trump rally in October of the same year, Musk displayed an outfit that could only be described in his own words. “As you can see, I am not just MAGA. I am dark MAGA,” (Al Jazeera, 2024). Musk sported a black hat that read the words, “Make America Great Again,” in its traditional bold lettering. His speech to the American people attending the rally was to vote for Trump in order to save themselves from the Democrats set out to take away their rights (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The interesting part of these findings can be related back to the hypothesis that celebrities can have a positive effect on political candidates. Whether it was through his presence or his own pockets, Elon Musk had triumphantly brought both attention and funding to the Trump campaign for the 2024 presidential election. He had even embarked on further efforts to solidify a win for Trump with a controversial giveaway of money, directly clashing with regulations on the illegality of bribery in elections. Musk’s portrayal of giving away \$1 million dollars a day leading up to November to 17 lucky winners registered to vote in swing states– and more importantly, planning to vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 election (Ioanes, 2024). Though challenged by many objectors to his financial move, his giveaway of money to register in a key state was slated as an acceptable practice. The argument that, “the purpose of the \$1 million reward for signing the petition appears to be to motivate voter registration and voting at the polls

by those sympathetic with the candidacy of Donald Trump in the key swing states for the 2024 presidential election,” had been pushed by Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner (Ioanes, 2024). Ultimately, the decision to have one of the wealthiest people in the world, and quite the notable public figure join him in his fight to win back the White House proved to be a victorious employment of a celebrity’s endorsement and involvement in politics.

Varied Socio-Psychological Theories Influencing People’s Choice

Another theory referenced by Nam Hyun (2018) is the, “third-person effect,” which details that, “ [the theory] predicts that people perceive media messages to wield greater persuasive influence on people other than themselves (Davison, 1983),” (Um, 2018). Applying this to celebrities and politics, people wouldn’t really admit that they themselves are influenced by celebrities when it comes to such a serious topic. Alternatively, people would suggest that others aside from them are more likely to succumb to that presented influence (from a celebrity figure). The reason behind this is due a sense of, “self-efficacy,” that people tend to want to have, particularly when it comes to discussing something as pressing as politics. The practice of self-efficacy indicates that an individual believes that they are in control of their own motivations, performances, and their overall social environment. In connection to politics, self-efficacy would suggest that a person wants to believe that they come to the conclusion of whom they are going to vote for based upon their own thoughts and feelings towards a candidate, not the words of an endorser or third-party figure. For a person to admit aloud that their choice to select a particular candidate for presidency came from an endorsement in the realm of fame may not leave positive impressions on oneself.

Of course, there were results from these findings proving the latter hypothesis to be true—celebrities can negatively affect a political figure by pulling away the intended attention from the political candidate, or not necessarily moving the needle with regards to bringing in voters for the candidate. From the same research on whether or not celebrity endorsements were effective provided by Nam Hyun Um (2018), there was a short discussion of a past presidential election from 2016. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump faced off for the coveted executive branch seat, and it was evident who was pulling in more A-list endorsements. Clinton had been backed by music industry moguls Beyonce and Jay-Z, and was using social media to appeal to the average young voter. However, she ultimately lost the election to former president Donald Trump, whose campaign wasn't necessarily joined by a plethora of famous figures. This same research even points out that, "Trump may not have received the most powerful celebrity endorsements, but it would seem he proved himself to be the most powerful celebrity endorser for himself," (Um, 2018). Trump has been a prominent businessman with his fair-share of acting credits, yet didn't enlist many Hollywood favorites to join his journey to enter the White House. One could even argue that all of the work that the Clinton campaign had put into her getting endorsements from celebrities was a waste of time. Trump became his own celebrity on his campaign trail, and supported himself. In Clinton's case, her campaign's call on celebrity endorsements failed her. They may have garnered attention as to simply catching a glimpse of big names speaking up on political issues, but that was all the celebrities had done.

A final point brought up in this same piece that discusses more so the thoughts and feelings of people is based in the same concept of identification. Nam Hyun (2018) cites the psychological and sociological findings of past researchers Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea (2003). Within their works, Nam Hyun (2018) points out that, "identification with a celebrity endorser is

likely to increase a desire to change aspects of one's own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to emulate more closely those of the celebrity (Basil 1996; Brown & Basil 1995; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003),” (Um, 2018). With this proposed notion, we can perhaps pair this idea with the first hypothesis of this essay. People, upon listening to the stances of a celebrity, may shift their perspective and ideals to align with that of the celebrity if they already have taken a liking to the famous figure. Let's briefly look back at the case study of George Clooney. If an individual already views Clooney in a positive light, hearing his stance on democracy and the threat President Biden posed had he not chosen to step down from the 2024 presidential race would elicit shared emotions from the person in question with Clooney's. Their views may shift to now care more about the election and what is at stake, and even further, care enough to also reconsider their own political beliefs and alter them to line up with that of George Clooney.

Discussion

Our main focus throughout this paper has been determining whether or not celebrities and those within the entertainment industry have any influence at all on politics. Furthermore, we are looking to see if that influence is either positive or negative.

Connecting back to our second hypothesis very briefly, celebrity endorsements or endorsements from within the entertainment industry can be neither beneficial nor detrimental to a political candidate. Rather, it could be viewed altogether as annoying, causing a backlash effect on both the political figure and the celebrity. Though he hadn't explicitly endorsed any political candidates during this year's election, famous music producer Pharrell Williams spoke up briefly about the involvement of celebrities and entertainers in politics. In an interview with “The

Hollywood Reporter,” Williams stated that he, “[doesn’t] do politics. In fact, I get annoyed sometimes when I see celebrities trying to tell you [who to vote for],” (Nelson, 2024).

Most of my findings, particularly from news articles and academic journals, put me in a position to believe that celebrities and entertainment figures had a more positive influence on politics. The past election results of former president Barack Obama, and his successful campaign with the likes of Oprah Winfrey were a precedent that I thought would carry over into the 2024 presidential election. Given the similarity of circumstance between Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris, as well as former President Obama joining Vice President Harris on her own campaign trail, I had a strong belief that this would have been the closest general election to date followed by a last-minute wave from Democratic voters. In a recent talk given at Hartwick College titled, “The 2024 Election: What are the Polls really saying,” American pollster and famed author John Zogby had mentioned that Vice President Harris’ presidential campaign announcement brought back Democrats, women voters, and most [but not all] Black voters into this election’s conversation (Zogby, 2024). The differing results in reality may have stemmed from the fact that a large majority of voters this time around were younger, and celebrity endorsements may just be outdated for this younger generation. The Harris-Walz campaign was one that had plenty of A-list celebrities and entertainment figures come forward with support throughout the past few months. In comparison, the Trump-Vance campaign focused more on niche podcasters and smaller [yet very right-winged] celebrity figures as opposed to having a star-studded list of endorsers. Jacob Bernstein, one of the many reporters for The New York Times, stated that, “[The presidential campaigns for Harris were] a show of dazzle in an election where clearly people were not looking for dazzle,” (McKinely, 2024). Well-known names like “Scandal,” actor Tony Goldwyn, Oprah Winfrey, Taylor Swift, and even Beyonce joined Vice

President Harris on her campaign trail urging Americans to get out and vote. All through the summer and into the late autumn months, “the biggest names in entertainment said Vice President Kamala Harris should be elected to the nation’s highest office. In the end, it did not seem to matter much,” (McKinley, 2024).

Looking back at some of the articles discussed earlier on in this paper, it is even possible to consider that phenomena such as the, “vampire effect,” (Veltman, 2024) could have been the reason why the Harris-Walz campaign ultimately did not succeed. The theory itself raises the possibility that celebrities and entertainment figures could pull away the attention from the presidential campaign they intended to drive support towards. The concept of the, “vampire effect,” was one I felt needed to be discussed within this paper. Perhaps there are past presidential elections where celebrity endorsements sucked away the attention from their intended target. The overall task of attracting fans– rather, the general public– and turning them into loyal supporters and voters for a given political figure is a tough one.

One of the findings that had stuck out to me most was the identification of Elon Musk as a celebrity, as well as his impressive means of laying financial foundations for Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign. Regardless of public biases, it is evident that the tag-team between Trump and Musk led to the success of Trump’s campaign to win back his presidential seat. And yes, to classify Elon Musk as a celebrity may be a bit of an interesting move made by media outlets. Yet, it permits room to argue that those who count as being an entertainment figure or celebrity are evolving. Of course Musk is well-known for owning billion-dollar businesses and scaring the public with technology of the future. However, Musk also has the ability to garner a response from the public following his outlandish comments on a variety of topics, including politics. His decision to stand in solidarity with Donald Trump sparked much conversation in the

press, ultimately doing the job of driving media coverage and conversation of both public figures– the whole purpose of seeking a celebrity endorsement to begin with (Basiouny et al., 2023).

In the years following this election, as well as this research, I believe the definition of who counts as a “celebrity” will begin to change. The definition from past generations may exclusively view celebrities as traditional red carpet, movie and television personalities, or chart-toppers within the music industry. However, younger generations of today may see celebrities or famous figures as those who merely hold a media platform. Celebrities would include those who are famous on platforms such as TikTok, X, YouTube, and Instagram alongside the traditional celebrity characterization. Even podcast hosts could and would be viewed as celebrities depending on their level of traction online. Ultimately, this growing umbrella of who counts as a “celebrity” could become detrimental to influencing politics. Social media now truly allows for anyone to gain an influential platform. This may give way for people to push messages to their fans to vote for corrupt politicians, send a message that politics and democracy are not that important altogether. In this day and age, I do not believe we are too far from a reality where messages such as this are being sent to an audience of voting age.

With regards to what the public should do with this compilation of information, there are several things I would suggest following the completion of this research. First, I would hope that people are more careful in choosing whom to trust or listen to when it comes to politics and elections. Celebrity endorsements are more of a convenient way for people who are not always on top of elections to get quick information– who’s running, who the celebrity supports, and why their fans should vote for the candidate they are endorsing. There isn’t much else people do once they have gotten that surface-level information from a figure they have grown to trust. But I do

believe that one must do more digging, for themselves, in order to fully understand what is at stake in a given election. Along with this, I believe people should admit that they can be influenced by famous figures within the entertainment industry. Politicians know that getting a familiar face to speak highly of them to the public is effective (to some extent), and employ this method often. But the public should be able to recognize when a celebrity is solely being used to draw attention, versus when a celebrity is choosing to actively engage in and truly care for democracy. To endorse a politician is an opportunity to not only prove that you are a citizen of the nation you reside in. It is also an opportunity to display a confrontation of the faults in our nation's government, and push for a candidate that may have the right ideas to effectively strengthen our country.

Conclusion

Altogether, I believe that the research within this essay shows that celebrities and those involved in the entertainment industry do have an influence on politics. Their actions and words can hold quite a bit of weight in connection with the political candidate of their choosing, and ultimate endorsing of said candidate. If research is done more on this topic in the future, I would hope that there is a deeper analysis done on the results of the 2024 presidential election and the celebrity endorsements that played a role in both majority parties. I believe there is more to be said about the specific figures that joined the Trump campaign trail in the past and present aside from those discussed within this piece– the same could also be said for the Harris campaign.

If I had the opportunity to expand upon my research, aside from analyzing the positive and negative influences celebrity figures have in politics, there is one variance I would like to examine. The 2024 presidential election has left an impression of there being a generational gap

between Generation-Z voters and voters of an older generation in relation to their receptiveness of celebrity endorsements in politics. My stance is that those who voted as a part of the younger generation were not as open or as interested in hearing from traditional celebrities in contrast to the older voting generation. The research provided within this essay showcased much conversation surrounding past presidential elections, where major entertainment figures joined presidential candidates on their respective campaign trails. If someone else were to take the foundations of this thesis to conduct studies on Generation-Z and their voting trends in relation to celebrity political endorsements, I believe there would be a fair amount of results to discuss.

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