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Celebritization from Below: Celebrity, Fandom, and Anti-Fandom in British Politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a more sustained consideration of how fandom – as both a set of practices and topic of political conversation – underpins a broader "celebritization" of politics and public life. It analyses, via a Twitter-based qualitative content analysis, the ways in which fandom is expressed and spoken about in relation to three contrasting politicians from the UK, namely Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Jeremy Corbyn. While the precise dynamics of fandom vary depending on the politician in question, our analysis identifies a more general tendency whereby overtly fannish discourses and practices co-exist with expressions of unease or hostility toward the figure of "the fan." This in turn reflects longstanding cultural representations of the figure of the fan as improper and excessive, particularly in the context of democratic politics. These contradictory responses to fandom in politics are crucial to understanding the ambivalent character of the celebritization of politics more generally.

Introduction

Despite popular culture's historically marginal position within the academic study of politics, questions of celebrity and "celebritization" have become increasingly prominent. This rise in interest in celebrity politics has been driven primarily by two closely related phenomenon: that of the celebrity from the more traditionally "celebritized" realms of sport or popular entertainment entering the domain of electoral politics; and professional politicians seeking to achieve success by adopting styles and marketing techniques associated with popular celebrity culture.[1] While these phenomena have produced a rich and varied literature on the nature and scope of celebrity politics, existing research on celebrity politics focuses on the utterances, practices and impact of *specific celebrities* (with the likes of Reagan, Schwarzenegger and Trump being among the textbook cases).

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[1]See, for example, John Street, "Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6, no. 4 (2004): 435–452; John Street, "Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14, no. 3 (2012): 346–56; John Street, "What is Donald Trump? Forms of 'Celebrity' in Celebrity Politics," *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2018): 3–13; Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics: Image and Identity in Contemporary Political Communications* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); and Matt Wood, Jack Corbett, and Matthew Flinders, "Just Like Us: Everyday Celebrity Politicians and the Pursuit of Popularity in an Age of Anti-Politics," *British Journal of Politics and International Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 581–598.

Less studied, however, are the ways in which citizens engage with, and respond to, different celebrity politicians, and/or the ways in which citizen practices sustain a "celebritization" of political life more generally. Consequently, this paper calls for a shift of focus away from the actions and practices of politicians, toward the behaviors and utterances of citizens. We do this via a detailed discussion and analysis of *fandom* as a key socio-political phenomenon that exists alongside, and to a certain extent sustains, a more general "celebritization" of politics and public life. More concretely, the empirical section of the paper uses qualitative content analysis to trace how fandom is understood, discussed and negotiated in media texts and on twitter. The analysis focuses on three contrasting British politicians: the late former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, former Labour prime minister Tony Blair, and former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Studying the precise ways in which Thatcher, Blair and Corbyn fandom are described and negotiated not only sheds light on everyday logics of political celebritization, it also shows us how fandom and celebritization sustain broader ideological cleavages in British public life.

The paper proceeds in five sections. To begin, the paper offers a general overview of how to conceptualize the relationship between fandom, politics and celebrity. Part two then provides a little more contextualization about the specificities of UK politics and the role of fandom and celebrity in an increasingly fraught and polarized post-Brexit political moment. Part three attends to methodological considerations. Part four summarizes the findings from our study and part five offers some broader discussions and conclusions. Our substantive argument is twofold. One the one hand, we find evidence that citizens can and do exhibit deeply felt passionate fan-like attachments to certain politicians, and these passionate attachments play a significant role in shaping the contours of wider antagonisms in British public life. Furthermore, logics of what fan studies scholar Jonathan Gray calls "anti-fandom" are also highly evident, manifest in citizens displaying a kind of inverse fandom by framing their politics as being *against* the fans of a specific politician. However, we also identify a certain ambivalence running through many of the expressions of fandom and anti-fandom. While fandom is frequently invoked, these invocations are often accompanied by forms of distancing and disavowal, for instance by saying "I'm no fan of Thatcher but . . . ." This distancing from fandom, we argue, means that celebritization, while prevalent, seems to be viewed ambivalently, insofar as fandom and celebrity are often acknowledged yet disavowed. These logics of disavowal and distancing are, we suggest, crucial to understanding the ambivalent character of the celebritization of contemporary British politics.

Fandom and the Celebritization of Politics

The nature, scope and impact of celebrity culture are well-established topics of analysis within sociology, cultural studies and media and communication studies[2] and have, more recently, gained a foothold in political science thanks in large part to the impact of John Street's seminal 2004 article on celebrity politicians.[3] Recent work on celebrity politics has tended to develop one of two lines of enquiry presented in Street's original article. One seeks to develop and refine taxonomies of different kinds of celebrity politicians, and/or

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[2]Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2014); David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[3]John Street, "Celebrity Politicians."

offer detailed case studies of specific celebrity politicians.[4] A second is more normative, seeking to reflect on whether the rise of celebrity politics poses a threat to the health of democratic public debate. The question here hinges largely on the extent to which celebrity politics brings otherwise excluded voices and views to the public realm, or whether it has a distorting effect by privileging certain voices and perspectives, many of which may have dubious credentials for informed participation in politics.[5] However, despite growing interest in celebrity politics, the study of celebrity politicians remains a rather niche pursuit within political science. Consequently, as Marsh *et al* noted, in a review of the celebrity politics literature, that "we need a great deal more systematic empirical work to grasp its nature, dynamics and impact."[6]

This paper aims to contribute to such an undertaking, but it also argues for a partial reorientation of the literature on celebrity politics. The crucial problem here is that much of the literature on celebrity politics tends to focus on the character and practices of celebrity *politicians*. By contrast, we want to stress "celebritization" as a broader logic that shapes politics over and above the specific practices of individual celebrity politicians. Celebritization is, therefore, a multifaceted process that consists of a several different phenomena functioning at different analytic levels. "Celebritization," in the context of politics, can refer to celebrities becoming politicians, or politicians seeking to cultivate "celebritized" styles of speaking, acting or campaigning. But it can also encompasses the actions and practices of individual citizens. This includes the ways in which different forms of fandom (be it of politicians or even celebrities) shape citizen engagements with politics. And it can also potentially encompasses the ways in which citizens talk, think and feel about politics in ways that invoke, or replicate, aspects of wider celebrity culture.[7]

Our focus in this paper is on these latter two elements, by focussing on fandom as a key, but often overlooked, component of the "celebritization" of politics and wider public life. Before turning the specifics of the relationship between fandom, celebrity and politics, let us first offer a brief synopsis of the existing scholarship on fandom in general, and fandom and politics in particular. Fan studies emerged in the early 90s as a subfield of media and cultural studies, in the context of a wider shift toward understanding the ways in which audiences responded to popular entertainment texts.[8] Much of this early work was concerned with countering popular stereotypes of "the fan" as dangerous, excessive or deranged, stressing that fandom had in fact become an increasingly common or mainstream form of pop culture consumption in an age of mass media.[9] More recent

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[4]John Street, "Do Celebrities and Celebrity Politicians Matter?"; John Street, "What is Donald Trump?"; Matt Wood, et al., "Just Like Us"; Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*; Valentina Cardo, "Celebrity Politics and Political Representation: The Case of George Galloway MP on *Celebrity Big Brother*," *British Politics* 9, no. 2 (2014): 146–60; and Philip Drake and Michael Higgins, "Lights, Camera, Election: Celebrity, Performance and the 2010 UK General Election Leadership Debates," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14, no. 3 (2012): 375–91.

[5]Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*; Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

[6]David Marsh, Paul 't Hart, and Karen Tindall, "Celebrity Politics: The Politics of Late Modernity," *Political Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (2010): 322–40, 337.

[7]See, for example, Akane Kanai, "Between the Perfect and the Problematic: Everyday Femininities, Popular Feminism, and the Negotiation of Intersectionality," *Cultural Studies*, 34, no. 1 (2020): 25–48.

[8]See, for example, Lisa Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[9]Joli Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992).

work has consisted of detailed analyses of the features and practices of specific fan communities,[10] or sought to offer more general conceptual reflections on how to understand fandom as a psychological, cultural and sociological phenomenon.[11]

Much of the above literature tackles questions of power, politics and contestation as these pertain to fandom, but, over the past decade or so, there has been a rush of fan studies work explicitly tackling the *politics* of fan communities and fan culture,[12] inviting reflection on how, precisely, the relationship between fandom and politics should be conceptualized. Fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss offers a neat, pithy definition of fandom as "regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text."[13] Taking up this definition, Jonathan Dean has offered a theorization of politicized fandom, highlighting four key dimensions.[14] These are: first, production and consumption (fan culture entails not merely the consumption of the fan object but also the production and circulation of new content such as memes, gifs, fan art, fan fiction etc.); second, community (fans typically engage with a collective of fans rather than in isolation); affect (the fan's attachment to the fan object, and often to fellow fans, is deep, emotional and passionate) and, finally, contestation (fandom is politicized when it is motivated by a desire to challenge and change some aspect of society as it is currently constituted). It is worth noting, however, that the character and intensity of politicized fandom can vary, and the boundaries between a "supporter" (or a politician, movement or organization) and "fan" are often blurred. Politicized fandom – so defined – can therefore encompass slightly different modalities of fan-based participation. It can include the expression of highly passionate, partisan, fan-like behaviors, such that the support base for certain politicians can become akin to a fan-base, as was the case with Trump and Clinton around the 2016 US Presidential Election.[15] In other instance, those passionate attachments can manifest via the explicit and intentional creation of "a fandom," in which the community attachments are more sustained, and the fandom becomes central to one's identity and day to day practices through, for instance, the production and consumption of fan videos, fan art, or even fan fiction.[16]

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[10]See, for example, Amanda Nell Edgar and Ashton Toone, "'She Invited Other People to that Space': Audience Habitus, Place, and Social Justice in Beyoncé's *Lemonade,*" *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 87–101; Dayna Chatman, "Black Twitter and the Politics of Viewing *Scandal,*" In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Beate Peter, "Beyond Capital, Towards Myth: EDM Fandom and Dance Practice," in *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, ed. Mark Duffett (London: Routledge, 2014).

[11]Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to* the *Study of Media Fan Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Matt Hills *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

[12]Henry Jenkins, "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012), http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/305/259; Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*; Ashley Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019); Mel Stanfill, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018); Jonathan Dean, "Politicising Fandom," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2017): 408–24; Ashley Hinck and Amber Davisson "Fandom and Politics," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 32 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1973; and Cornel Sandvoss, "Toward an Understanding of Political Enthusiasm as Media Fandom: Blogging, Fan Productivity and Affect in American Politics," *Participations* 10, no. 1 (2013): 252–296.

[13]Cornel Sandvoss *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 8.

[14]Jonathan Dean, "Politicising Fandom."

[15]Jocelyn Smith, "The Politician/Celebrity and Fan(girl) Pleasure: The Line Between Queen Hilary and Presidential Candidate Clinton," *Persona Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 35–50.

[16]Phoenix Andrews, "Fan Wars: Jeremy Corbyn, Fans and the 'Antis,'" in *Corbynism in Perspective: The Labour Party Under Jeremy Corbyn*, ed. Andrew S. Roe-Crines (Newcastle, UK: Agenda, 2021).

However, as indicated, the increasing visibility of fandom within politics relates not just to the emergence of fan-based identities and practices. It also relates to the increasing prevalence of the *language* of fandom within contemporary politics, with categories such as "fan" and "fandom" appearing with increasing frequency in wider public debate. Indeed, the new edition of an influential edited book on fandom begins by noting that "fandom is an ever more commonplace experience. The proliferation and simultaneous transformation of fandom are well illustrated by, for instance, the emergence of 'fan' as a common description of political supporters and activists."[17] To study fandom as a political phenomenon, therefore, one has to consider not just fan practices, but also the ways in which (discourse about) fandom seems to have permeated what Ariadne Vromen *et al* call "everyday political talk," that is, the protean ways in which politically-interested citizens discuss political events, ideas and opinions.[18]

Suffice to say, the relationship between these related but nonetheless separable phenomena – celebrity politicians, fan/citizen practices, and discourses about fans and fandom – is complex and the precise manner of their inter-relationship varies considerably depending on context. At times, they can be mutually reinforcing, e.g., a celebrity politician (such as Trump) cultivates a fanbase, some of whom invest in their support for Trump to such an extent that they become a fandom, which then in turn is met with a range of wider discourses about, and reactions to, Trump fans.[19] But in other contexts – such as those described below – discourses about fans, especially those that dismiss or repudiate forms of politicized fandom, can happen in the absence of traditional celebrity politicians. Fan practices can also *attribute* a certain degree of celebrity to specific politicians even if they themselves are not classic "celebrity politicians" in Street's sense.[20] Thus, these different elements, taken together, help sustain a wider "celebritization" of politics and public life, but the relative importance of each of these elements, and the precise relationship between them, will vary depending on the context.

The Celebritization of UK Politics: A Word on Context and Case Selection

While logics of celebritization – and the forms of politicized fandom associated with them – are prevalent across a number of national contexts, this paper chooses three case studies from contemporary British politics (indeed, primarily English politics given the different political context in Scotland). While this is in part down to both authors being located in the UK, and thus our greater familiarity with UK politics, there are a number of features of contemporary UK politics that render it particularly ripe for analyzing logics of fandom and celebritization.

In the first instance, there is a widespread perception that UK politics is becoming increasingly *polarized*, leading to a "digital dissensus" in which the consensual politics that characterized much of the post-Thatcher era has given way to new political antagonisms,

[17]Cornel Sandvoss, Jonathan Gray, and C. Lee Harrington, "Introduction: Why Still Study Fans?" in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Cornel Sandvoss, Jonathan Gray, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1.

[18]Ariadne Vromen, Michael A. Xenos, and Brian Loader, "Young People, Social Media and Connective Action: From Organisational Maintenance to Everyday Political Talk," *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 80–100.

[19]John Street, "What is Donald Trump?".

[20]John Street, "Celebrity Politicians."

particularly in the aftermath of the referendum over Britain's EU membership.[21] This is in turn reflected and aided by a second feature, alluded to above, namely that the languages of fandom are becoming increasingly prevalent within British politics, to such an extent that leading fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss has spoken of the "fanization" of British politics around the time of 2017 General Election.[22] Although associated primarily with the groundswell of support for then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, this "fanization" of UK politics has – perhaps counter to previously familiar claims of citizen apathy and disengagement – served, to some degree, to normalize fan-like attachments to politicians, whereby selfies with politicians, or the sharing of memes of gifs of politicians one admires, have become part of everyday political discourse.[23]

Against this wider backdrop of an increasingly celebritized and "fanized" public sphere, this paper analyses three case studies which provide an opportunity to analyze in a more fine grained manner the precise texture and character of fandom and celebritization. The case studies are all high profile politicians: Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Jeremy Corbyn.

The late Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) was Prime Minister for the Conservative Party from 1979–1990. As well as being the first woman prime minister, Thatcher profoundly changed the contours of British politics by dismantling the postwar social democratic consensus and paving the way for the "neoliberal turn" in British politics and society.[24] Despite having been dead since 2013, Thatcher's importance in the collective imagination of much of the Conservative right can scarcely be exaggerated, admired for her strong leadership, perceived patriotism, and uncompromising approach. As such, Thatcher fandom has become a significant feature of right-wing politics in the UK, affording her something of a "celebritized" character even if she herself, in her conduct and style, was far from being a "celebrity politician" in the sense described by Street. What is more, Thatcher *anti-fandom* plays a key role in shaping the affective and ideological contours of left politics in UK. In this context, an "anti-fan" is someone "who actively and vocally hates or dislikes a given text, personality, or genre,"[25] often to such an extent that someone's identity or sense of self is shaped partly by their hostility or opposition to the person or text in question. Although *relatively* uncommon in entertainment fandom, anti-fandom is particularly prevalent in the more tribal and antagonistic terrains of sport and politics. Indeed, in UK politics, much of the left has derived a sense of coherence and purpose from a shared Thatcher anti-fandom, i.e., perceiving one's politics as being largely *against* the values and legacy of Thatcher.

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[21]Phoenix Andrews, "Receipts, Radicalisation, Reactionaries, and Repentance: The Digital Dissensus, Fandom, and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 6 (2020): 902–907; see also Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, "Tilting Towards the Cosmopolitan Axis? Political Change in England and the 2017 General Election," *The Political Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (2017): 359–369; and Jonathan Wheatley, "The Polarisiation of Party Supporters Since 2015 and the Problem of the 'Empty Centre' – in Maps," London School of Economics, June 6, 2017, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-polarization-of-party-supporters-since-2015/.

[22]Cornel Sandvoss, "Corbyn and His Fans: Post-truth, Myth and Labour's Hollow Defeat," Election Analysis, 2017, http://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2017/section-8-personality-politics-and-popular-culture/corbyn-and-his-fans-post-truth-myth-and-labours-hollow-defeat/.

[23]Leo McLoughlin and Rosalyn Southern, "By Any Memes Necessary? Small Political Acts, Incidental Exposure and Memes During the 2017 UK general election," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2021): 60–84; and Phoenix Andrews, "Fan Wars."

[24]Stuart Hall, "The Neo-liberal Revolution," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 705–728.

[25]Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 840; and Sarah McRae, "'Get Off My Internets': How Anti-Fans Deconstruct Lifestyle Bloggers' Authenticity Work," *Persona Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 13–27.

Our second case study is Tony Blair, Labour prime minister from 1997–2007 (and leader of the Labour Party from 1994). Blair's leadership saw Labour consolidate its move from a left social democratic politics toward a more centrist politics that largely accepted the neoliberal revolution instigated by Thatcher, a move which paid electoral dividends with three decisive general election victories in 1997, 2001 and 2005. However, Blair's popularity dwindled following his unpopular decision to bring the UK into the 2003 war on Iraq, compounded by a widespread perception that his leadership was technocratic, elitist and reliant on "spin." Blair's centrist politics is such that he is subject to intense forms of "anti-fandom" from both left and right. However, Blair fandom has recently reemerged: in the aftermath of Britain's vote to leave the EU, Blair has made several interventions making a robust defense of Britain's EU membership, much to the delight of some opposed to Brexit. Furthermore, Labour supporters opposed to Jeremy Corbyn (see below) have often indulged a degree of Blair fandom by counter-posing what they see as Blair's sensible, centrist politics with the radical politics espoused by recent leaderships of the Labour and Conservative parties. What is more, much like Thatcher, Blair is subject to a considerable degree of left-wing anti-fandom, given that his vision of Labour politics left many on the left feeling marginalized and alienated from the Labour Party, and indeed electoral politics more broadly.

Our final case study is former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who led the party from 2015 until 2019. Corbyn is a veteran left-wing Labour MP who was the unexpected victor in the 2015 leadership election (following Ed Miliband's resignation after Labor's poor performance at the 2015 General Election). Corbyn's victory was met with incredulity by some who felt his association with the radical left and history of campaigning on unpopular and controversial issues would inevitably condemn Labour to electoral oblivion. By contrast, many on the left were galvanized by Corbyn's leadership, expressing levels of support and enthusiasm for Corbyn that prompted widespread talk of "Corbynmania," manifest in Labor's substantially increased membership, huge crowds for Corbyn speeches, and the popularization of the chant of "oh Jeremy Corbyn" (set to the riff of the White Stripes' *Seven Nation Army*), especially following his triumphant appearance at the 2017 Glastonbury Music Festival. Corbyn fans were further galvanized when, against expectations, Labour significantly increased its share of votes and parliamentary seats at the 2017 General Election, denying Theresa May's Conservative government an overall majority.[26] That post-2017 optimism proved to be short-lived, however, and Corbyn resigned following the party's disastrous performance at the 2019 General Election, and was replaced by Keir Starmer, whose politics are much closer to the center-left politics that has been dominant in the party in recent decades. However, the polarization of UK politics alluded to above was driven in part by Labor's left turn under Corbyn, such that Corbyn fandom vs Corbyn anti-fandom was, for a time, a key dividing line in UK politics, the aftershocks of which have continued into the post-Corbyn era.

Overall, then, the three cases are chosen because, despite representing very different ideological strands and coming from different historical moments, they all continue to play a key role in shaping the ideological and affective landscape of recent British politics.

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[26]Richard Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (London: Verso, 2016); Eunice Goes, 'Jez, We Can! Labour's Campaign: Defeat with a Taste of Victory," in *Britain Votes 2017*, eds. Jonathan Tongue, Cristina Leston-Bandeira, and Stuart Wilks-Heeg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

While Corbyn fandom is perhaps the most pressing and visible of the three in the present moment, Blair and Thatcher continue to exhibit a political afterlife that persists beyond their political or literal death. More generally, the fact that our three cases are drawn from the right, the center and the left shows suggests that fandom and celebritization are not specific to any one partisan political position but, rather, constitute a more general feature of contemporary British politics.

A Word on Method

Having chosen our key case studies our aim was to trace two key elements of the "celebritization" of UK politics: first, expressions of fandom, i.e., being a fan of one of the politicians mentioned above and, second, the ways in which fandom in general is framed or spoken about in discussions about these three politicians. We were also interested in expressions of anti-fandom, i.e., the ways in which one's politics is framed primarily through being negatively invested in a particular political figure. Against this backdrop, we formulated two hypotheses from our initial impressions of media portrayals of Thatcher, Blair and Corbyn and their supporters, past and present. Our hypotheses are as follows.

First, all three individuals are described as having "fans" and the word "fan" is *usually* used pejoratively in this context, to describe uncritical enthusiasm for a politician. This support is personal (i.e., specific to the politician in question). This personal support may in turn reflect support for wider projects or ideologies (such as socialism, or the European Union), but its primary mode of expression is in and through a specific person, rather than a project, party or ideology in general. Our second hypothesis, with regards Thatcher and Blair, their celebrity and notoriety is such that references to them in the media and conversation persist in relation to current politics, indeed to such an extent that they play a significant role in shaping the wider discursive and affective contours of current political debate in the UK.

We tested these hypotheses via analysis of two main data sources. First, to get a feel for the larger discursive context, we gathered evidence of the media portrayal of the three cases by collecting references to personal fans and fandoms for these politicians in the mainstream media, past and present, using searches in Nexis, Google and internal newspaper search engines. Additionally, we read profile pieces on these politicians and found examples of fannish writing and behaviors. The media sources for both profiles and media searches were selected based on the YouGov lists of most popular newspapers, lifestyle & fashion magazines and news & politics magazines in the UK – with the addition of the BBC website. The search terms used were "fan," "fan club," "fanclub," "fan base," "fanbase," "fangirl," "fan girl," "fan boy" and "fandom."

Secondly, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of relevant Twitter data.[27] Organic face-to-face conversations about politics are difficult to ethically observe, but Twitter data can function well as a limited proxy for such conversations. Most content posted onto Twitter is publicly viewable, and this is common knowledge among users of

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[27]For studies which are similar to ours in terms of method, see Kristen Mapes, "A Qualitative Content Analysis of 19,000 Medieval Studies Conference Tweets," *Proceedings of the 34th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication*, 48 (2016); and Sarah Goodier, "Evaluating the Network: A Workflow for Tracking Twitter Interactions Using Social Networking Analysis," *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* no. 2 (2018): 1–13.

the platform. What is more, Twitter is now a well-established, indeed mainstream, site of political discussion in an increasingly socially-mediated milieu.[28] While Twitter users can and do sometimes make unguarded comments, they do so in the knowledge that such comments may be seen by others (including people not registered as Twitter users). Twitter users also have the option of deleting tweets, preventing their tweets being seen by particular people, and/or making their profiles private (and thus only viewable to followers). Thus, without wishing to be too complacent about the ethics of Twitter-based analysis, Twitter does provide an opportunity to analyze political conversation among citizens in ways that are less intrusive and less ethically troublesome than face-to-face conversations. To further ensure this, the tweets we do cite have been kept anonymous. To conduct our analysis, we set up three TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Sheets) sessions to search for and capture tweets relating to Thatcher, Blair and Corbyn separately from 1-December 31, 2017. This was a full month where Parliament was mostly in session, and Jeremy Corbyn, Tony Blair and Brexit were regularly in the news. Tweets from accounts with fewer than 15 followers were excluded, to avoid including spam and bot accounts where possible, and the TAGS archive was updated every hour during the data collection period.[29]

We then undertook Boolean searches to help us find relevant tweets, using the same broad terms for each politician: *name AND fan OR fans OR stan or stans* ("stan" is a colloquial expression for a particularly voracious and enthusiastic fan[30]). To minimize false positive results, the minus symbol (-) was used to exclude common terms relating to other Thatchers, Blairs and Corbyns. This process was refined by iteration during a pilot study in November 2017, using searches in both TAGS and TweetDeck, which showed that using politicians' full names was too restrictive. TAGS limits the number of exclusions, so it was impossible to exclude all known irrelevant tweets, but excluding the most common terms aided the data cleaning process, particularly for Blair and Corbyn. Table 1 provides a full overview of the search terms used.

The data were then cleaned, to remove irrelevant and duplicate tweets and retweets, before being manually coded as positive, negative or neutral about the politician and positive, negative, neutral or "defensive" about being a fan of the politician. The latter classification became apparent in the pilot phase of the study, with "not a fan of X, but" or "no fan of X, but" and similar phrasings commonly appeared in captured tweets. As opposed to being negative about their political opponents being too enthusiastic

Table 1. Search strings used in TAGS.

	Search string
Thatcher	fan OR fans OR stan OR stans AND Thatcher
Blair	fan OR fans OR stan OR stans AND Blair OR Bliar -walsh -imani -game -dame -jeff -bluejays -ranger -hughes -youtube -bears -ducks -Dev_Blair -brian_blair -gossip -Blair_Witchin -taggart -rosso -falcons -jays -waldorf -oklahoma -bluejaysalways -bluejaysfan -mikey -seahawks -redford -blairedford -blair_michael -blairedfordweb -nba -theblairwitchproject -mowat -samson -finley_blair -roadtriptv -saga -orleans – seattle
Corbyn	fan OR fans OR stan OR stans AND Corbyn -"Corbyn Besson" -besson -corbynbesson -austin -jonah – band

Table 2. Number of tweets before and after cleaning.

	Total number of tweets collected	Tweets remaining after cleaning
Thatcher	588	134
Blair	1357	120
Corbyn	3963	796

about a politician, these Twitter users wanted to make it clear that they did not wish to be seen as "fans" or overly positive themselves, but agreed with the politician or thought they were useful in certain circumstances. In addition, sometimes it was necessary to look at the context of the tweet (the account that tweeted it, the thread of tweets and replies in which it was situated) in order to classify tweets.

Table 2 shows the final total of tweets for each individual, before and after the data were cleaned. Many of the removed tweets were irrelevant or duplicate tweets. A news story about Margaret Thatcher refusing to share a flight with a panda led to a large number of tweets about the right Thatcher, but relating to a headline dubbing her as "not a panda fan." Popular relevant tweets were retweeted a large number of times within the data collection period and those retweets were removed from the dataset – retaining the original tweet.

For example, one Thatcher-related tweet from 29 December was retweeted over 80 times before the month was over and a Corbyn-related tweet from 29 November continued to pick up a large number of retweets in the first week of December. One Blair-related tweet had over 300 retweets and over 750 likes. It was also necessary to remove a large number of almost identical tweets (one was kept for the sample) from an account that kept self-retweeting and copying the same tweet with different recipients and/or hashtags.

Fandom, Anti-Fandom and Celebritization: A Note on Findings

Thatcher

Thatcher fandom figured prominently in both the media analysis and the Twitter search. Expressions of Thatcher fandom became particularly prominent around the time of her death in 2013, but continue to resurface in Twitter debate. Indeed, there are more tweets in the sample about Thatcher than Blair, despite Tony Blair being the younger and more recent politician and Thatcher having died in 2013. Notable about Thatcher fandom is that positive expressions of Thatcher fandom tend to be couched in slightly qualified terms: people self-describe as "admirers" of Thatcher, in turn reflecting the fact that Thatcher cultivated a persona which was distant and decisive (the "Iron Lady") rather than warm and personable. Witness, for example, the following description of Thatcher fandom by fashion accessories designer Anya Hindmarch:

> I am a lifelong fan of Margaret Thatcher and had the great honour of meeting her and making her handbags," Hindmarch told us. "She was very much part of the get-up-and-go spirit and was a big influence on me and many others at the time I started my business … .. She is a strong and charismatic woman and was apparently a terrible flirt which I admire.[31]

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[31]Anya Hindmarch, "Thatcher's Fashion Fan," *Vogue*, January 6, 2012, http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/anya-hindmarch-launches-margaret-thatcher-windows.

Similar sentiment is also expressed in the following excerpt from news coverage around the time of Thatcher's funeral, in which one fan, Dave, goes so far as to have Thatcher body art:

> An admirer of Margaret Thatcher, who is in Whitehall to watch the funeral procession, has had a tattoo imprinted on his leg in memory of the Iron Lady. Dave had the body art done yesterday and said: 'There's no such thing as an archetypal Thatcher fan.'[32]

Other expressions of Thatcher fandom are more circumspect, such as this reflection from a young Conservative Party member:

> Obviously she's dead but I've always been a big Margaret Thatcher fan. I'm a Thatcherite. But I like David Cameron and Theresa May and I do respect Labour MPs like Dennis Skinner. I prefer Cameron to May, though. Socially, she isn't really my ideal. She voted against gay marriage and things like that. It's bad.[33]

The perception of Thatcher as strong and a formidable political operator – often in contrast to what some fans perceive as the mediocrity of the recent crop of politicians is evident in the following tweets:

> My Grandfather was a Tory member waaay back in the 1980s. Diehard Thatcher fan, too. He would have been sickened by how some Tory members and MPs have behaved.

> It's unfortunate that a real leader with superb political acumen couldn't see what was happening. I'm a Thatcher fan, not a Thatcherite.

> Margaret Thatcher mainly and her legacy, which I am a huge fan of! Erm undoubtedly Churchill (the greatest PM of all time) and the values of hard work, the free market and patriotism!

Finally, several tweets invoked Thatcher fandom, but then disavowed it so as to distance oneself from the implicitly troubling figure of "the fan." One tweet, for instance, read: "I was no fan, but I doubt if the Tory Party had someone determined as Thatcher as leader instead of Cameron & May. Then we wouldn't be in this situation."

However, in addition to these generally (if cautiously) positive affirmations of Thatcher fandom, Thatcher was also subject to particularly vitriolic forms of anti-fandom. Perhaps most notable among these was the fact that the song *Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead* from *The Wizard of Oz* entered the UK singles chart at number 2 immediately following her death, selling 52,605 copies in the process.[34] While this might strike some as distasteful, it is testament to the strength of negative feeling toward Thatcher amongst much of the British electorate, especially on the left.

Tony Blair

The early years of Blair's premiership arguably constituted one of the first clear cut instances of sustained politicized fandom in the UK, as Blair's popularity and telegenic

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[32]Anon, "Mourners Bid Thatcher Farewell," *ITV*, April 17, 2013, http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-04-17/thatcher-fan-has-she-never-turned-tattooed-on-arm/.

[33]Tess Reidy, "Young Tories Tell Us How They Got Into Politics," *Vice*, October 19, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9bj8ja/young-tories.

[34]"Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead Enters Chart at Two," *BBC News*, April 14, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22145306.

demeanor afforded him a celebrity status that few British politicians had hitherto enjoyed.[35] Toward the end of his Premiership, however, Blair fandom had largely ebbed away. As former MP Michael Connarty remarked in 2005, "He has to realise that he has to deal with this entire collective. It's called the Labour Party, not the Tony Blair Fan Club."[36] Indeed, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Robert Colville offers a cautionary note about Emmanuel Macron's celebritized persona based on the decline of Blair's celebrity, noting that "New Labour was, like Mr. Macron's En Marche!, less a political party than a cult of personality. Watching Mr. Macron on the campaign trail is reminiscent of a 1997 election advertisement showing the young Labour leader treated like a boy-band star, feted by adoring fans as he makes his way to the polling booth."[37]

However, post-Brexit, there is evidence of a resurgence of Blair fandom in British public debate. The same number of people whose tweets were fully positive about Tony Blair also positively identified as fans of Blair. This was not the case for Corbyn and Thatcher, who were mentioned in tweets that were positive about them but neutral or negative about fandom. Blair fandom is particularly prevalent among those who feel dismayed by Britain's departure from the European Union. Blair's time in government was characterized by an unapologetically supportive attitude toward Britain's EU membership (and privately, was a supporter of Britain joining the euro). Blair's standing among some pro-EU voters was further boosted by his criticisms of not just the government's handling of Brexit, but also what he considered the Corbyn leadership's insufficiently robust opposition to Brexit. As such, the majority of supportive fan tweets about Blair make implicit or explicit reference to Brexit, as these tweets testify:

> Such a worry, big Blair fan, would have liked a @DMiliband Labour, how different things would be with an @EdMillibad [sic] Government. Was not the right time for an EUref.

> I was a fan of Tony Blair (there it is, I said it) up to the Iraq War, and had little time for him since; however, I do feel that he would have aced the Brexit negotiations.

> I have never been a Blair fan until now. Now, the man has really gone up in my estimation. We need this man back in Number 10. If anyone can stop #Brexit, this man can. Go for it, Tony! Go!

In some cases, however, this same sentiment prompted some Twitter users to expressive a kind of defensive fandom, saying they were "no fan" of Blair, but nonetheless expressing a reluctant support for his principled anti-Brexit position. These tweets are typical:

> I left the Labour Party because of the Iraq War, so I'm no Tony Blair fan, but needs must, I'm afraid. Stopping Brexit comes first so I'm prepared to forgive Blair's dreadful, vain-glorious sycophantic mistakes, for now, if he can keep us in the #EU. #StopBrexit #brexitshambles

> I'm no fan of Blair – wasn't from day one - but if somebody tells you youre [sic] house is on fire do you check his CV out first or do you go and look?

Finally, the ascension of the Labour left under in the context of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership saw a sharp rise in left-wing Blair anti-fandom. For many Corbyn supporters, Blair

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[35]Margaret Scammell "Political Brands and Consumer Citizens: The Rebranding of Tony Blair," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611, no. 1 (2007): 176–192.

[36]Brian Brady, "The Final Whistle for Blair?" *The Scotsman*, November 6, 2005.

[37]Robert Colville, "Meet Emmanuel Macron, the French Tony Blair," *Wallstreet Journal*, May 7, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/meet-emmanuel-macron-the-french-tony-blair-1494186119.

fandom (and the centrist ideological stance that tends to accompany it) was seen as precisely the kind of sentiment the Labour Party needed to push against. This tweet from a Corbyn supporter is typical (Owen Smith is a Labour MP who launched an unsuccessful bid in 2016 to oust Corbyn as leader):

> MY CLP [Constituency Labour Party] is like a Chapter of the Tony Blair Fan Club. They even nominated that Knob #OwenSmith. Neil Coyle is my MP

Meanwhile, Red Labour, a small Marxist group on the far left fringes of the party, mockingly described the "centre-left" group Progress as "the main Tony Blair fan club in the Labour Party,"[38] reflecting a the tendency for those on the left of the Labour to take Blair anti-fandom as an ideological given.

Jeremy Corbyn

Of the three case studies under discussion, Corbyn is the one in which notions of fans, fandom or a fan club were invoked most regularly. Much of the wider discussion surrounding Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party was centered upon the fact that many of Corbyn's supporters displayed fan-like levels of passion and enthusiasm.[39] What is more, Corbyn fandom is testament to the importance of fan agency in shaping the celebritization of politics, given that it is largely Corbyn fans rather than Corbyn himself who consolidated the rise of so-called "Corbyn-mania." While the term "Corbyn-mania" is perhaps somewhat pejorative, used primarily in the context of media coverage that sought to mock the passion and intensity of Corbyn supporters, we use it here to capture the widespread perception that the scale and intensity of "fannish" support for Corbyn proved greater than many anticipated.[40] Indeed, the scale and intensity of "Corbyn-mania" provoked a mixture of disdain, bewilderment and incredulity from critics. This was in part down to the fact that Corbyn himself exhibits a modest, understated demeanor, in contrast to the vocal enthusiasm of his fans. This paradox underpinning Corbyn fandom has become so well known that it was recently parodied on the spoof news show *The Mash Report*, which contained a segment with the headline "experts believe that Jeremy Corbyn's fans are the first example of a personality cult devoted to someone with no personality."[41] This was then followed by the appearance of a "professor" who was asked to offer a scholarly explanation for the phenomenon.

While *The Mash Report* was lighthearted in its treatment of Corbyn fandom, other responses were more overtly hostile. Within much mainstream media, Corbyn supporters' alleged status as a "fan club" was seen by some as *prima facie* evidence that Corbynism as a whole is a flawed political project. Veteran Labour MP Margaret Beckett for example, drew an implicit distinction between Corbyn fans and genuine Labour supporters, remarking:

> It's perfectly nice and legitimate thing to be a member of a fan club and they may get a great deal of satisfaction from it but that doesn't mean you belong to the Labour Party and I'll be

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[38]Red Labour, "Untitled," Facebook, June 23, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/RedLabour2016/posts/481219838881466.
[39]Phoenix Andrews, "Fan Wars."
[40]Jonathan Dean, "Politicising Fandom."
[41]*The Mash Report*, Series 1 Episode 4, directed by Paul King, BBC TV, February 8, 2018.

sorry to think that vast numbers of those people in fact do not really want to be in the Labour Party, they just want to support Jeremy.[42]

In a similar vein, in a long polemic against Corbyn in the *New Statesman*, media studies academic Daniel Allington argued that the trouble with Corbyn was that it was geared toward attracting "socialism fans," rather than Labour voters.[43] Some invocations of Corbyn fandom were, by contrast, condescending rather than explicitly critical, typified by this excerpt from right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail*'s coverage of Corbyn's campaign to remain Labour leader in 2016:

> Launching his Labour leadership campaign on Thursday, Jeremy Corbyn was accompanied by an all-female fan club, some from the hard-Left Momentum group set up to bolster support for him.[44]

In opposition to negative or critical views of Corbyn fandom, however, was the frequent claim from Corbyn supporters that Corbyn's capacity to galvanize passion and enthusiasm on the part of his supporters should be viewed positively as a welcome upsurge of political interest and engagement. In a direct riposte to the above mentioned *Daily Mail* article, the women profiled said:

> . . . earlier at Jeremy Corbyn's press launch many of us who accompanied Labour's leader to a public event were attacked in the Mail as "besotted groupies" with personal remarks about our appearance sprinkled throughout the article. The online abuse and trolling piled in at the same time. The way in which people are treated for daring to support Corbyn or join Momentum is rarely discussed – perhaps because we don't discuss it, not wanting to dissuade people from getting involved, which is still an overwhelmingly positive experience.[45]

A similarly positive appraisal of Corbyn fandom was offered by *Guardian* journalist Zoe Williams, who stated:

> I read in November – as part of the dazed explanation for Donald Trump's victory – that "stans" were more important than supporters. I had to Google what a stan was: it is a wild enthusiast, an off-the-charts believer, a person who will bore the pub down. Corbyn has these, and no other British politician does. If I'm honest, I read that and I still didn't believe it, but when our Wales correspondent Steven Morris said this morning: "Corbyn's crowd was so big in Colwyn Bay that nobody could believe that many people lived in Colwyn Bay," I thought, "stans."[46]

However, on Twitter there is a curiously mixed picture. While lots of people were active and vocal in their support for Corbyn, relatively few explicitly self-identified as Corbyn "fans." Even those that did tended to equivocate, for example one Twitter user who

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[42]Anon, "Dame Margaret Beckett: New Labour Members Just "Corbyn Fans,"" *ITV*, August 15, 2016, http://www.itv.com/news/update/2016-08-15/dame-margaret-beckett-new-labour-members-corbyn-fans/.

[43]Daniel Allington, "Jeremy Corbyn Has Attracted 'Socialism Fans,' Not Labour Voters," *New Statesman*, April 25, 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/june2017/2017/04/jeremy-corbyn-has-attracted-socialism-fans-not-labour-voters.

[44]Sam Greenhill and Christian Gysin, "All-Female Fan Club," *Daily Mail*, July 22, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3704293/All-female-fan-club-s-Labour-leader-Jeremy-Corbyn-s-gaggle-besotted-groupies.html.

[45]Kati Herrington, Freya Cann, and Naomi Berry, "Dispatches Won't Stop Momentum Inspiring Young People," *New Statesman*, September 19, 2016, http s://ww w.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/09/dispatches-wont-stop-momentum-inspiring-young-people-were-here-stay.

[46]Zoe Williams, "Eight Reasons Why Jeremy Corbyn Robbed Theresa May of a Landslide," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/09/jeremy-corbyn-theresa-may-landslide-manifesto-youth-vote-conservative-campaign.

Table 3. Extract from coding table for Corbyn data – typical pattern.

politician positive	politician negative	politician neutral	fan positive	fan negative	fan neutral	fan defensive
N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N

wrote: "I am massive Corbyn fan and a big supporter of the labour party, but sometimes the supporters on the labour forums make me lose hope." By far the most prevalent explicit type of invocation of fandom in relation to Corbyn involved the negative ascription of fan-like characteristics to Corbyn supporters. Often, this was expressed in quite an uncompromising or hostile manner, often invoking popular representations of left politics as tending toward conformity or totalitarianism. The following tweets were typical:

> Love all the nonsense from the average Corbyn cult fan. They all read from the same bloody hymn sheet provided by [pro-Corbyn organisation] Momentum.

> I attack Corbyn's behavior on Brexit rather than the man himself. And I'll be honest, majority of my ire is directed at divisive, myopic, hypocritical and abusive die-hard JC fans such as [left-wing journalist] Owen Jones.

> thought 4 the week: basically don't become a "fan" of any politician. It's creepy. That goes for the Sanders/Corbyn types I tend to align with too. These people all suck. Vote on policies and ideologies you agree with and don't turn people you don't know into goddamn teddy bears

Thus, most tweets about Corbyn and his supporters are generally negative about *both* the politician *and* fandom in general: Corbyn is seen negatively in part because his supporters are seen as fans, rather than serious, rational or reasonable citizens. (See Table 3 above)

Discussion: Positive Versus Defensive Fandom

A number of implications follow from our analysis. On the one hand, it confirms our hypothesis that expressions of fandom, as well as invocations of the category of "the fan" in wider political discourse, are well established within "everyday political talk." As has been noted elsewhere, practices traditionally associated with pop culture fandom seem to be increasingly prevalent within contemporary British politics.[47] Practices such as the production of fan videos, the taking and circulation of selfies with politicians, the production and circulation of memes and gifs depicting one's favorite political figure: these are all now an established part of the vernacular of contemporary political engagement. Politician fandoms also sometimes ape the standard pop culture fandom practice of adopting an often humorous name for the fan community, such as "Milifandom" in the case of fans of former Labour leader Ed Miliband, or "Moggmentum" in the case of hard-line pro-Brexit Conservative MP

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[47]Phoenix Andrews, "Choose Your Fighter: Loyalty and Fandom in the Free-speech Culture Wars," in *The Free Speech Wars*, ed. C.L. Riley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Matt Hills, "It's the Stans Wot (Nearly) Won It"; and Cornel Sandvoss, "Corbyn and His Fans."

Jacob Rees-Mogg (itself a play on Momentum, the name of the pro Jeremy Corbyn organization).

However, despite the prevalence of fannish *practices* within British politics, this does not always translate into an explicit positive embrace of fandom *per se* as an identity. In our Twitter analysis, we found that some respondents did positively identify as fans themselves, or are positive about other people being fans of a politician. However, as Table 4 suggests, these were very much in the minority, with most explicit references to fans and fandom being neutral or negative.

This kind of double movement around fandom – i.e., its apparent presence as a practice and a discursive term combined with an unease around positively embracing "the fan" as an identity – is particularly evident when we consider the prevalence of what we call "defensive fandom" in current political discourse (see Table 5). This refers to the phenomenon of invoking and disavowing fandom at the same time, usually by saying they are "not a fan of X" but that X has something useful, valuable or important to say, typically in relation to Brexit. The analyses above contain several instances of this, particularly in relation to Thatcher and Blair. In both cases, a typically "defensive" fannish tweet asserts that they are no fan of Thatcher/Blair, but that they admire their tough stance or leadership (often implicitly in contrast to what is perceived as the weakness or prevarication exhibit by the current generation of political leaders). When taken at face value, the claim that one is "no fan" of a particular politician is purely descriptive, i.e., a neutral claim about one's political stance. But the *frequency* with which defensive fandom appears suggests a certain unease, or ambivalence, in the acknowledged proximity to fandom, alongside the desire to not to be read as a fan. This in turn suggests that the figure of "the fan" exists in a liminal state, marking a threshold demarcating acceptable from unacceptable modes of political engagement.

This hostility or unease surrounding the figure of "the fan" is, we suggest, testament in the first instance to the continued hold of negative stereotypes of "the fan" which provided the backdrop to much of the early fan studies work. Fan studies scholars have described how fandom is often perceived as outright dangerous, with high profile cases such as John Lennon's killer Mark Chapman being seen as simply an extreme end of a continuum of "deranged fans."[48] But even if fans are not seen as dangerous, they are

Table 4. Positive about fans.

	Thatcher	Blair	Corbyn
Positive ID as fan/positively IDed other as fan	17	12	58
Negative or neutral about fans	117	108	734

Table 5. Defensive fandom.

	Thatcher	Blair	Corbyn
Defensive fans	30	51	231
Not defensive	104	69	565

[48]Joli Jensen, "Introduction."

often seen as in some way "excessive." Think, for instance, of the excessive teen and pre-teen sexuality that was seen to characterize early Beatlemania.[49]

Despite becoming more common, our analysis suggests that fandom continues to be seen as deviant, excessive or "improper."[50] While this is true of fandom in general, it is perhaps even more true in the context of politicized fandom. Implicit in many of the disavowals of fandom in our analysis is a belief that good, healthy, democratic politics should be sensible, moderate, rational, deliberative and, as far as possible, bipartisan. Fandom is seen as "improper" for politics, therefore, precisely because it is seen as excessive, irrational and at odds with traditional understandings of the democratic public sphere.[51] What is more, this is in part a gendered distinction: the "fan" is implicitly feminized (indeed explicitly so in the *Daily Mail* article referred to above), whereas the public sphere is coded as masculine.

As such, the presence of defensive fandom, and hostility toward fandom per se (at least as a mode of politics) should be seen within the context of a longer standing tendency to discipline the acceptable parameters of democratic politics. The attempt at de-legitimizing fandom as a mode of political expression reflects and reinforces longstanding historical constructions of liberal democratic citizenship that prioritize order, civility and the somatic norms of white bourgeois masculinity.[52] What is more, this rear-guard defense of traditional liberal democracy has taken on a renewed visibility in the context of the rise of various forms of insurgent politics critical of mainstream liberal democracy, for which the descriptor "populism" is often used. In response, recent years have seen a rise of so-called "anti-populism," a discursive formation and political sensibility that seeks to shore up the liberal status quo by casting "populists" of various stripes as, variously, mad, irrational, dangerous, or over-emotional.[53] Although politicized fandom and populism are distinct phenomena (albeit with some overlap), this ambivalence toward fandom can, we argue, be usefully contextualized within a wider reaction, manifest most explicitly through the rise of anti-populism, against what are perceived to be various challenges to the affective norms of liberal democratic politics.

Concluding Reflections: On the Celebritization of Politics

Overall, the picture of celebritization in the UK looks something like the following. First, there is the well-documented tendency for politicians to adopt certain styles and modes of engagement traditionally associated with the realm of popular entertainment.[54] A further key element of celebritization, documented here but overlooked in much of the "celebrity politics" literature, entails expressions and enactments of fandom toward certain political figures. In some cases, this simply consolidates the celebrity persona of the politician in questions (as is the case with Trump, and arguably also Blair). In other cases, it *attributes* a kind of (sometimes

[49]Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: A Sexually Defiant Consumer Subculture?" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992).
[50]Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xii.
[51]Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
[52]See, for example, Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (London: Berg, 2004).
[53]Benjamin Moffitt, "The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe," *Democratic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1–16.
[54]M. Wood, et al., "Just Like Us."

ironic) celebrity status to figures who are not, on their own terms, "celebrity politicians" in a traditional sense (as was the case with Jeremy Corbyn, and his predecessor Ed Miliband). These latter cases in particular, emphasis the importance of the agency of citizen fans in shaping wider political discourse. However, beyond these explicit, tangible forms of celebritization, there is a third element. This relates to the aforementioned prevalence of the language of fans and fandom in everyday political discourse. But it is here where the unease around fandom becomes most prevalent, with much of the explicit talk about fandom being either overtly negative – seeing fandom as intrinsically problematic within politics – or defensive: insisting that despite their admiration for a political figure, they are not a "fan." While these three elements co-exist, and can mutually reinforce, they are highly variable depending on context.

In light of the above, it is, in our view, helpful to refer to celebritization as a *logic*: to do so stresses the fact that celebritization is uneven, multifaceted, and present in different forms and to different degrees depending on context. The term "logic" is chosen deliberately here. It references recent theoretical work in post-marxist political theory, in which one frequently finds the term "logic" used to refer to "the rules or grammar of a practice."[55] but whereby such rules "contain possibilities and contextual richness that cannot be captured by any one expression of them."[56] Thus, to consider celebritization as a logic presumes that it contains the three elements thus described, but there will always be a richness and contextual specificity that prevents the three elements existing in a pure form. Indeed, the slipperiness of the logic of celebritization is compounded by the fact that it is, as we have seen, subject to continuous repudiation and disavowal. While many acknowledged its presence, it is typically cast as being present elsewhere, attributed to others. Thus, while it has a tangible existence through fannish practices, it also has a more spectral existence whereby it is simultaneously invoked and disavowed across a broad swathe of contemporary public debate.

Thus, further research in this area could, potentially, entail empirical research into the precise mechanisms through representations of fandom and "the fan" figure in political discourse, to capture more precisely the ways in which fandom is invoked and dismissed. There could also be scope for more conceptual work on how to make sense of its elusive, spectral nature. Finally, the admittedly small-scale study discussed here could potentially be replicated in order to offer comparisons between the nature and scope of "fandom talk" at different historical moments. Despite the limitations of the study, it does, we suggest, indicate that "celebritization," so defined, remains a key feature of contemporary British politics. That is not to say that a logic of celebritization in contemporary British politics is *the* overarching master-narrative of our present moment. Our claim is more modest, namely to suggest that celebritization is part of the terrain of contemporary politics, and we need to take it seriously if we are to understand contemporary forms of political engagement in all their complexity.

Disclosure statement

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[55]Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2.
[56]Ibid, 137.

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