

The democratic worth of celebrity politics is dependent on whether or not there is ideological substance behind the politician

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The celebrity politician has become a fixture of our modern age. [Mark Wheeler](#) discusses the effect on democratic outcomes.



In recent years, there has been an increased involvement of celebrities in the political process. As P. David Marshall has commented politicians have constructed 'public personalities' which have an 'affective function' in the organisation of interests and issues. Clearly, these figures perceive their usage of the mass and multi-media to be an effective means through which to influence public opinion. This has had a profound impact upon the practice of politics, and the way in which it is communicated.

But how far do celebrity politicians and politicised celebrities actually affect outcomes? Traditionally, many academics view celebrity politics as a 'manufactured process' fabricated by media exposure. Public interest in celebrity has been manipulated through contrived, pseudo-events staged by a cynical media. However, as celebrities have become politically engaged within the public sphere, this literature requires a re-evaluation.

[John Street's article](#) "Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation" argues that celebrity politics has given a greater expression to the representation of democratic behaviour. In particular, Street asks whether celebrities can use their reputations to reinvigorate politics with new ideas and an aggregated form of political agency. He is concerned about the connection celebrities can make with the public through their ability to be 'in touch' with popular sentiment. This has been mediated through 'fandom' in which an 'intimacy with distant others' can be understood as the basis of political representation. Street contends that such a representational relationship is established by the 'affective capacity' of the celebrities and modern politicians' cultural performances.

Consequently, as celebrities and image candidates assume the authority to promote political agendas among target audiences/citizens, it becomes necessary to reflect upon their significance in election campaigns, policy agendas and activism.

Street's concerns about the relationship between political aesthetics and democratic practice segue into a wider debate about the dynamics which are shaping post-democratic societies. Here it is contended that traditional civic duties are being replaced by alternative forms of virtuous participation. Within this new political environment, different types of agency such as celebrity politics have become centrifugal forces for public engagement. In this respect, Street's analysis can be linked to [Henrik Bang's arguments](#) that new forms of political capital are emerging as 'Everyday Makers' utilise community based narratives to engage with one another. Similarly, [John Keane's concept of 'Monitory Democracy'](#), in which consumer led forms of representation become the measurement of accountability, has considered how changes to the matters of 'voice' and 'output' have reformed democratic practices.

In the light of these concerns, this analysis employs the United States' (US) President Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign as a case study. Within this campaign, Obama defined himself as a celebrity politician and utilised innovations in communication technologies to re-engage with the American electorate. His story was one of a rapid rise from being a little-known state senator for the 13th District of Chicago, who made a well-received speech at the 2004 Democratic National

Convention, to the senator for Illinois in 2004, to that of a presidential candidate who deployed information innovations within his campaign. Throughout his campaigns, his candidacy demonstrated how demo-elites should remain in constant contact with the electorate to build for success.

Therefore, Obama's ascendancy to the US presidency can be seen to be representative of the confluence of the reconfigured relationships that have emerged between the Everyday Makers, Monitory Democracy and the political classes. Sean Redmond has described Obama as a 'liquid celebrity' who effectively communicated with those American citizens who had become disenfranchised by machine politics. He formed linkages with non-traditional activists by being a charismatic authority figure who promoted solidarity by fixing a communion with the public founded upon the construction of triumphant spectacularism. Through his catchphrase of 'yes we can' he promised the US electorate a palpable, yet undefined, sense of 'togetherness' to deal with the nation's economic, political and foreign policy ills. Moreover, within his website MyBarackObama.com, Obama established a form of celebrity performance that was built on reciprocity and shared meaning to encourage the popular scrutiny of his political deliberations. The often disaffected 'mobile youth' gravitated towards him and his messages of change, hope and identity.

However, in the fall-out of Obama's presidency, it is necessary to examine Bang and Keanes' arguments concerning the reconfiguration of democratic behaviour to consider whether they provide the appropriate means through which to capture the value of celebrity politicians. Their arguments aid understanding of the role of celebrity politicians such as Obama in creating 'spaces' to define links between the political classes and the public. Yet, if the normative expectations of celebrity politics are limited to a measurement of voice and output alone, such activity has no greater merit than in relaying the values of the demo-elite to the public or in allowing oppositional groups to articulate their interests.

Consequently, this analysis contends that for celebrity politics to have an appropriate value, it must be seen to enhance civic virtues through the mechanisms of input and agency as much as illustrating the openings for voice and output. For celebrity politicians to have a democratic worth they need to demonstrate ideological substance and provide clarity in establishing a fixed range of meanings upon which people may achieve a real sense of connection with political causes. Consequently, such forms of activity should provide the basis upon which citizens may participate in terms of their own political efficacy to define a wider sense of the common good.

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