

## Information about celebrities' political activities can influence how people think about political parties

*From Lady Gaga to Justin Bieber, to Oprah, celebrities have a tremendous influence over people's lives. But does that influence also extend to how people think about political parties as well? In new research, **Anthony J. Nownes** looks at how people react when given the information that celebrities have made contributions to the Republican and Democratic parties. He finds that when people dislike a celebrity, and that celebrity has contributed to a party, then they like that party less. He also writes that celebrities' political activities inform how people view them; such that those who dislike a party are turned off a celebrity who they are told has supported that party.*



Celebrities are, and always have been, a part of American politics. While a limited number of them have become politicians (e.g., Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger), many more endorse candidates. For example, in 2008, George Clooney, Samuel L. Jackson, Brad Pitt, will.i.am, Oprah Winfrey, and others endorsed Senator Barack Obama for president, while Jon Cryer, Clint Eastwood, Lee Greenwood, Chuck Norris, and many others endorsed Senator John McCain. Still other celebrities engage in lower profile political activity, especially contributing money to political parties and candidates.

All of this celebrity political activity begs the following questions: Does celebrity political activity matter? Does it affect the way ordinary citizens view candidates and/or parties? Does it affect the way ordinary citizens view politically active celebrities? Recently, I addressed these questions via a randomized experiment in which some of my 503 respondents (i.e., respondents in the two treatment groups) were exposed to factual information about celebrity support for political parties and some were not. My results show that celebrity political activity can indeed influence some citizens' views of political parties. They also show that celebrity political activity can affect citizens' views of politically active celebrities.

After perusing public records, I discovered that two very popular American celebrities had histories of contributing money to candidates: football star Peyton Manning (a supporter of Republicans), and actress Jennifer Aniston (a supporter of Democrats). Based on previous marketing and political science research, I looked at how voters' evaluations of the Republican and Democratic Parties changed when they were given information about Manning or Aniston's financial support for either party.

To uncover how voters' evaluations might change, I randomly assigned 503 subjects to one of three groups— **the control group** (n= 177), **the Aniston treatment group** (n=145), or **the Manning treatment group** (n=181). On the first day of the experiment, each student (no matter the group) was administered a brief questionnaire (the pre-test questionnaire) which contained several questions about each respondent's political attitudes and affiliations (e.g., 2008 vote choice, ideology, party identification) as well as his/her opinions of nine politically active celebrities, four contemporary political figures, the "tea party" movement, and four political parties. The survey also questions about respondents' personal characteristics (e.g., academic major, age, family income, home state, race/ethnicity).

On the second day of the experiment, respondents in the three groups were treated differently. Students in the control group took the identical survey again. Students in the Aniston treatment group were given the post-test survey with a cover sheet that looked like this:

### ***Obama and McCain: Both Pet Lovers***

*Barack Obama and John McCain have something in common: they are both pet lovers. The country's "First Dog" is named Bo Obama. He is a Portuguese Water Dog. John McCain is also an animal lover. Reports indicate that he has over 20 pets, including many saltwater fish, four dogs, a*

cat, and two turtles.

### **Jennifer Aniston Among Democratic Donors**

*Recent data released by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) indicate that actress Jennifer Aniston contributed heavily to the Democratic Party and President Barack Obama during the 2008 campaign. Aniston, best known for her work on the long-running television program Friends, contributed \$2,300 to Barack Obama's campaign committee in 2008, and another \$26,200 to the Democratic National Committee.*

Respondents in the Manning treatment group were given the post-test survey with a cover sheet that looked like this:

### **Obama and McCain: Both Pet Lovers**

*Barack Obama and John McCain have something in common: they are both pet lovers. The country's "First Dog" is named Bo Obama. He is a Portuguese Water Dog. John McCain is also an animal lover. Reports indicate that he has over 20 pets, including many saltwater fish, four dogs, a cat, and two turtles.*

### **Peyton Manning Among Republican Donors**

*Recent data released by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) indicate that quarterback Peyton Manning has contributed heavily to Republican candidates in recent years. Manning, the former University of Tennessee quarterback and current signal-caller for the Indianapolis Colts, contributed \$1,000 to Senator Bob Corker in 2009. Manning also contributed \$4,200 to Corker in 2006, \$2,000 to the Bush/Cheney presidential campaign in 2004, and \$2,300 to Fred Thompson's political action committee (PAC) in 2007.*

In short, while respondents in the control group completed identical pre- and post-test questionnaires, respondents in the Aniston treatment group completed a questionnaire with a cover sheet containing information about Jennifer Aniston's support for the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates, and respondents in the Manning treatment group completed a questionnaire with a cover sheet containing information about Peyton Manning's support for Republican candidates. The cover sheets presented to respondents in the two treatment groups also contained an innocuous story about the two 2008 presidential contenders' love for pets in addition to the actual stimulus. I included this innocuous information to obscure the true purpose of the experiment.

My results support the general notion that celebrity giving to political parties and their candidates can indeed affect peoples' views of the political parties. First, when people who dislike Jennifer Aniston (that is, who give her a low rating on a "feeling thermometer" scale) are exposed to information about her support for Democrats, they report liking the Democratic Party less. Second, when some people who like Peyton Manning (that is, who give him a high rating on a "feeling thermometer" scale) are exposed to information about Manning's support for Republicans, they report liking the Republican Party more. If we think of the political parties as "brands," my results suggest that information about which celebrities "use" each brand can affect people's attitudes about the brands. This said, the data I examine here suggest that if celebrities want to help the parties they support by "going public" with this support, they may have a hard time doing so. I say this because Jennifer Aniston's impact on people's views of the Democratic Party was only negative. In addition, Peyton Manning's effects on respondents' views of the Republican Party were positive, but quite modest.

As for the celebrities themselves, the data clearly show that political activity affects how people view them. In sum, people who are not particularly fond of Republicans (that is, give the Republican Party a low score on a "feeling thermometer" scale) are turned off by Peyton Manning's support for the GOP and adjust their opinions of him accordingly. Similarly, people who dislike the Democratic Party (that is, give the party a low rating on a "feeling

thermometer” scale) view Jennifer Aniston more negatively after learning about her support for Democrats. Aniston, however, unlike Peyton Manning, gets something good from her political activity; the Democratic Party’s biggest fans like her more after learning about her support for Democratic candidates.

My results suggest that information about celebrities’ political activities can influence how people think about the political parties. It is too early to say whether or not party identification itself is open to change due to exposure to information about celebrity political activity, but the data are suggestive.



Peyton Manning Credit: [Tennessee Journalist](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0](#))

*This article is based on the paper “[An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of Celebrity Support for Political Parties in the United States](#)” in American Politics Research.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

**Anthony J. Nownes** – *University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Anthony Nownes is Professor of Political Science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Most of his research focuses upon interest group politics in the United States. His book, [Total Lobbying: What Lobbyists Want \(and How They Try to Get It\)](#) was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006. He is currently working on a number of projects, including one that examines the role of lobbyists in the government procurement process.



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