



It doesn't affect my vote: Third-person effects of Celebrity Endorsements on College Voters in the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections

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ABSTRACT

In the 2004 and 2008 presidential election campaigns, Hollywood celebrities loudly and proudly voiced their support for the candidate of their choosing. With fundraisers, speeches, concerts, and advertisements, celebrities were not shy. But do people really care who actors and musicians endorse? Have we become a culture so entrenched in the aura of celebrity that we rely on their opinions to choose our democratic voice? It is important to understand the effects of campaign strategies on voters, including celebrity endorsements. Third-person effect predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communication will have on the attitudes and behavior of others (Davison, 1983). Specifically, individuals exposed to a persuasive communication will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. Pew Research (2007) reported that only 15% of respondents believed that Oprah's endorsement of Obama would positively affect their vote; however, 60% believed that the endorsement would benefit Obama. In this paper, I will look at the role of celebrity endorsements in the 2004 and 2008 campaigns and analyze the effect they had on voters as well as the perceived effects on others. As we move forward towards the already celebrity-saturated 2012 election, it is important to understand the role of celebrity in today's political scene.

KEY WORDS

Celebrity activism, political communication, third-person effects, celebrities, 2004 election, 2008 election, presidential election campaign

I. INTRODUCTION

During the 2004 and 2008 presidential election campaigns, Hollywood celebrities loudly and proudly voiced their support for the candidate of their choosing. For decades, Hollywood A-listers and Washington Insiders have frequently traveled in the same circles and celebrities have taken to endorsing political candidates. Today, however, “the line between Hollywood and Washington has virtually disappeared” (Cannon, 2003, p. 22). Celebrity endorsements have become necessities for both political causes and political candidates. Similarly, being active in various causes has become the standard for celebrities; “whether it’s to satisfy one’s social conscience or to elicit good PR, celebrity activism is becoming the entertainment industry’s unofficial pastime” (Smillie, 1998, p. B1). Do people really care who actors and musicians endorse? Have we become a culture so entrenched in the aura of celebrity that we rely on their opinions to choose our democratic voice?

Very little research has been conducted to determine the effects of celebrity endorsements on politics (Garthwaite & Moore, 2008). Endorsements, in general, represent an area with little research, primarily due to the lack of an appropriate measure to determine the endorsement’s impact (Stratmann, 2005). Garthwaite and Moore (2008) found strong evidence that Oprah’s endorsement of Obama during the 2008 Democratic primary had an impact on both Obama’s success and the overall voter turnout. The researchers estimated that Oprah’s endorsement was responsible for 1,015,559 votes for Obama, in an election where Obama defeated Hillary Clinton by only 278,966 votes. Although primaries assign delegates on a state-by-state basis rather than according to total votes, it is of relevance in the specific area of celebrity endorsements to note the numerical impact that one celebrity’s endorsement can have on an election. Similarly, Garthwaite and Moore estimated that Oprah’s endorsement was responsible for increasing voter turnout by 2,196,476 – a substantial amount in an election where 33,386,184 votes were cast. In addition, evidence suggests that celebrities have the ability to influence fans’ behavior in many areas, such as product endorsements. Therefore, it is logical to assume that if fans can be influenced to purchase a product due to a celebrity’s paid support then these endorsements should also be effective in the political realm where there is no direct financial incentive to the celebrity endorser (Garthwaite & Moore, 2008).

It is important to understand the effects of campaign strategies on voters, including celebrity endorsements. Third-person effects theory predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communication will have on the attitudes and behavior of others (Davison, 1983). Specifically, individuals exposed to a persuasive communication will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. In this paper, I look at the relationship between celebrities and politics, address the role of celebrity endorsements in the 2004 and 2008 campaigns, provide a brief literature review of third-person effects theory, propose hypotheses derived from the literature, and analyze the effect that celebrities had on voters as well as the perceived effects on others. For purposes of this research, the term celebrity endorsements refers to the public support of a political candidate by a person who is well-known or famous in areas other than politics, such as music, sports, movies, or television.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The mingling of Hollywood celebrities and Washington politics has a long history. Throughout the 19th century, politics, its rallies, marches, and clubs, were primary forms of entertainment, and “politicians were the nation’s first aristocracy of celebrity” (Grier & McLaughlin, 2003, p.1). At the time, political leaders were the only people who were famous – they were the celebrities. Since that time, politics and celebrities have become inextricably linked (Marks, 1999). For most of the century, celebrity involvement in politics was primarily decorative and ceremonial; the political issues they were involved with (i.e., wars, McCarthyism, civil rights) overshadowed the celebrities’ participation (Marks & Fischer, 2002). However, in the last two decades, celebrities have become more visible in the political spotlight, and the Hollywood-Washington connection has developed many facets. Celebrities become politicians, politicians become celebrities, celebrities champion causes and endorse politicians, and both causes and politicians need celebrity activism to succeed. They have both joined existing activist campaigns and actively initiated causes of their own (Marks & Fischer, 2002).

The switch from actor to politician is neither a new nor an unrealistic leap. Hollywood and politics require similar skills: an ability to communicate with large groups of people, a capability to perform, and a knack for navigating the throes of fame and power (Grier & McLaughlin, 2003). Former-president and actor Ronald Reagan successfully made the switch from actor to governor of California to President of the United States. Arnold Schwarzenegger, former body builder and action star, served two terms as Governor of California before returning to Hollywood as a cartoon character called “the Governator,” a name he was referred to during his political tenure due to the fame of his role in “The Terminator.” Sonny Bono, Child-star Shirley Temple Black, Ben Jones (“Cooter” from “The Dukes of Hazzard”), and Fred Grandy (“Gopher” from “The Love Boat”) served in Congress. Former-pro-wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota, and Dirty Harry, aka Clint Eastwood, was mayor of Carmel, California. Jerry Springer of daytime fame moved in the other direction, beginning his career as mayor of Cincinnati. Fred Thompson, former star of television’s “Law and Order,” has moved between the worlds of Hollywood and Washington. Thompson began his career in film, was elected to the Senate, returned to television, and, in 2008, made a run for the Republican ticket. It is often the actors’ notoriety, developed through their media exposure, that provides the necessary publicity to succeed in full-fledged political careers (Marks & Fischer, 2002). Feldmann (1999) suggested that traditional political alliances are weakening, which allows big celebrity names to garner votes.

Similarly, celebrity activists support a variety of issues, spanning the political spectrum. Celebrities became attached to the Democratic Party and its causes in the 1930s. Possibly, the privileged status of celebrities provides them with a sense of guilt to embrace causes on the far left (Baker, 2007). “The left has had a schizophrenic relationship with celebrity. On one side is condemnation: the attention lavished on celebrities is at best a waste of time; at worst, it’s a dangerous distraction from more important issues” (Duncombe, 2007, p. 22). On the other side is adoration, and the politics of the left are legitimized by our modern-day gods – celebrities (Duncombe, 2007). Although celebrities typically support causes on the political left, artists have been known to support controversial issues on the right as well (Marks & Fischer, 2002). Whichever way they lean, Hollywood’s biggest celebrities have become some of the most

influential political activists. If a celebrity supports a cause or politician, then the public, the media and policy-makers will take notice (Duncombe, 2007). A number of celebrities have hired political consultants to advise them on various policy and lobbying issues (Smillie, 1998). Formal and informal networks exist to make the connection between celebrities and political causes - like a “political dating agency” (Street, 2002).

Not only are celebrities eager to get involved with political causes and candidates, but causes are anxious to have celebrity representation. Activism can bring a star both personal satisfaction and respectability, and the causes and candidates get money and media attention, the two things they need most (Smillie, 1998). A celebrity face makes that particular candidate or cause stand out in a sea of political causes. Celebrities are assumed to symbolize authority “for no other reason than their seeming ability to rise above the noise of participatory democracy” (Marks & Fischer, 2002, p. 385). Smillie (1998) suggested that celebrities and politicians offer each other something that they individually lack; elected officials have credibility, but are often not liked; and celebrities are well-liked and admired, but don’t often have credibility or respectability to their names. Celebrities sell, which is largely why they’re celebrities (Chapman, 2007). Even if celebrity endorsements don’t translate directly into votes, the money they raise should translate into support (Moore, 2007).

Street (2002) explained that social movements need celebrities to legitimize their causes, and celebrities do this by lending both their celebrity and popularity to them. Causes need someone to represent them to the world, and who better to do that than a famous face? Politics is a world of social networks, and celebrities have some of the largest and most influential networks. Once a cause attracts the attention of a celebrity, that celebrity will recruit others through his or her own social network (Street, 2002). For example, during the 2004 campaign, John Kerry’s campaign gained the support of Bruce Springsteen. Through Springsteen’s ties, the star-studded Vote for Change concert tour began, including Dave Matthews, R.E.M., the Dixie Chicks, Pearl Jam, and Bonnie Raitt. In 2008, Springsteen again stumped for the Democratic candidate, this time headlining fundraising concerts for Obama, with tickets costing upwards of \$10,000, as well as his Inauguration concert on the National Mall.

Marks and Fischer (2002) suggested that people the political climate has shifted to one that is conducive to celebrity are increasingly taking their cues from celebrity activists. The researchers explained that activism. First, traditional social movement leaders’ power to incite has diminished. Celebrities now lead the media spectacles meant to draw attention to a cause. Second, activists no longer represent grassroots movements; instead, important issues and celebrity endorsements are now synonymous and social movements must share the spotlight with Hollywood celebrities (Marks & Fischer, 2002).

Unfortunately, although celebrity involvement in politics often leaves the public entertained, it has been argued that this “celebrification” or “trivialization” of politics does little for the serious discussion of policy (Feldmann, 1999, p.1). During the past decades, American culture has grown increasingly celebrity focused (Marks, 1999). Life, itself, has become entertainment oriented. Most American institutions are now driven by entertainment (Gabler, 1998). Politics is no different. Marks and Fischer (2002) argued that the shift to a celebrity-driven activism depicts a fundamental shift of power in the U.S., which reflects a simulated system of government; the

media serve as a means for real democracy to be replaced by a simulated one. The researchers explained that the media deploy celebrities to simulate the public's political consent. The American culture is becoming more accepting of celebrity political agendas. People often rely on celebrities in part to help them become politically knowledgeable (Marks & Fischer, 2002).

During the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, Presidential candidates had some of the biggest stars in Hollywood at their sides endorsing their candidacy. These celebrities are symbols of support to a candidate, and if voters identify with the celebrities, then the celebrities' supporters would follow suit and back the candidate (Payne, Hanlon, & Tworney, 2007).

In addition to endorsements, celebrities stepped out to help "Rock the Vote" through non-partisan voter registration efforts. Public Enemy's Chuck D has long been involved with the 20-year-old MTV "Rock the Vote" organization. In 2004 and 2008, MTV had celebrities encouraging the 18-24-year-old group through commercials, college campus visits, and concerts to get out the vote. Newer to the campaigning circuit was Sean "P. Diddy" Combs' 2004 Citizen Change campaign, with its slogan "Vote or Die." Both campaigns increased voter awareness of their cause. Citizen Change had a 22% awareness among the 18-plus demographic and Rock the Vote was even higher at 45% (MediaVest, 2004). Whereas Citizen Change has consistent awareness across all age groups, Rock the Vote, mainly due to its MTV affiliation, skews to 18-24 year olds (MediaVest, 2004). In 2008, Rock the Vote registered 2.6 million voters and had 5.7 million people visit their website (Rock the Vote, 2009). One cannot be sure that these celebrity-driven campaigns were directly responsible for voter turnout (Payne et al., 2007). However, all of these efforts undeniably played a role in the record-level turnout of young voters, with over 22 million young voters (18-29 years old) voting in 2008, 2 million more than in 2004 and 6.5 million more than in 2000 (Rock the Vote, 2009). This led to a majority of young people (51%) voting, the highest level since 1972.

Although market research shows that P. Diddy and Chuck D helped to make audiences aware of their voter registration campaigns, little scholarly research addresses the public's perception of celebrity activists or the effects that they have on society. Do celebrity endorsements make a difference? Did they make a difference in these presidential elections? Reports are conflicting. Some say no, reporting that less than 10% of people were influenced by a celebrity endorsement in the 2004 election (Maurstad, 2004). However, MediaVest (2004) reported that 40% of young adults 18-24 years old were influenced by celebrity endorsements, and 15% of all adults reported a celebrity influence on their voting preferences. If nothing else, celebrity endorsements may impact young people as a "stepping stone activist experience;" they attend a political event/concert because Springsteen is playing, and they stay to take part in the political activity associated with it (Duncombe, 2007). Our nation's youth often show an apathetic attitude towards voting and find politics wasteful and boring (Payne et al, 2007). Maybe celebrity-driven campaigns are what they need to take notice and act.

THIRD-PERSON EFFECTS

Davison (1983) proposed the third-person effect hypothesis based on anecdotal sociological evidence; his research substantiated the claim. Third-person effect predicts that people will overestimate the persuasive power of mass media messages on the attitudes and behaviors of

others. The belief is that, whereas persuasive communication will not affect “you” or “me,” it will affect “them,” the third person. People evaluate the likely effect of persuasive media messages and compare their own reaction with that of others both in and beyond their reference groups (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004).

Anecdotal examples and empirical scholarly research consistently support a third-person effect. For example, Davison (1983) attributed fluctuations in the stock market to third-person effect. The fluctuations are often credited to rumors or news reports. People anticipate that the reports will cause others to either buy or sell stocks; therefore, they buy or sell to anticipate others’ actions.

Salwen (1998) found a similar third-person effect in election censorship research. He determined that people perceived election campaign messages to have a greater influence on others than on themselves. Based on this perception, they supported the censorship and restriction of election messages. Accordingly, Perloff (1996) reported that 15 of 16 studies examined supported the perceptual hypothesis. Both Paxton (1995) and Tiedge, Silverbatt, Havice and Rosenfeld (1991) reported that more than 90% of respondents perceived greater media effects on others than on themselves. Specifically relevant to this study, in the 2008 presidential election campaign, a Pew Research study (2007) found that 15% of voters said they would be more likely to vote for a political candidate endorsed by Oprah Winfrey (Obama). While 69% of respondents said that their vote would be unaffected by the endorsement, 60% said that they believed the endorsement would help Obama, demonstrating a third-person effect for Oprah’s endorsement (Pew, 2007).

Lo and Wei (2002) determined that a third-person effect exists with Internet pornography. The researchers reported that people believe that Internet pornography has a greater negative impact on others than on themselves. Women perceived the negative effects to be greater on males than on other females. This effect supports the third-person hypothesis’ idea of the impact of social distance. Social distance is a key variable in third person’s supposition that perceived effects are greater for the third person than for “me” or “you” (Meirick, 2004). The greater the social distance between a person and a group, the greater the gap in the perceived impact of a persuasive message (Meirick, 2004). For example, residents in Cleveland, Ohio, would believe that a negative news story would have a small impact on “self,” a larger impact on “other Clevelanders,” an even larger impact on “other Ohioans,” and the largest impact on the “public opinion at large.” Similarly, Meirick (2004) discussed perceived effects on “in-groups,” or self, versus “out-groups,” or them. People make group comparisons; they highlight the similarities to in-group members and the differences with out-group members. This reference group approach to social distance is relevant in political contexts (Meirick, 2004). For example, Republicans viewing an anti-Republican ad would see the smallest effect on themselves, a larger effect on other Republicans, the in-group, and the largest effect on Democrats, the out-group. When addressing the effects of political advertising on reference groups, Meirick found a greater perceived effect of the out-group candidate’s ads on the out-group and general public than on self or in-group.

Although third-person effects have been clearly documented in over 20 years of empirical research, the hypothesis is often criticized because scholars still lack a clear understanding of a cause for this phenomenon – why people perceive themselves to be smarter and less affected by

media messages than others (Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997). There are, however, a number of possible explanations as to why this third-person effect occurs. First, people believe that they have information unavailable to other people (Davison, 1983). Because “they” don’t know what “we” know, they are more likely to be influenced by the persuasive media message. Second, Davison (1983) suggested that people with each point of view see the media as biased against their side; therefore, they assume a disproportionate effect will occur because of the arguments or facts supporting the “wrong” side of the issue. People believe that, in order to have a balanced media, the coverage would need to be skewed toward the “correct” side of the issue. Because it’s merely a statement of the obvious truth, they don’t see the correct side of the issue as being persuasive. Third, Meirick (2004) explained third-person effects as occurring due to self-enhancement. When a persuasive media message is seen as undesirable, a third-person effect occurs. However, if a message is seen to be desirable, or that it would be smart for a person to be influenced by it, third-person effect is minimized. Fourth, Salwen (1998) suggested that people have limited understanding of their thoughts and cognitive processes. They believe that they are much more discerning about harmful media messages than they really are. Therefore, they believe that they are unaffected by the negative messages when they actually are affected. They believe others to be less discerning and, therefore, vulnerable to the powerful media.

Critics also suggest that third-person effects research has failed “to identify the contingent factors that might enhance or diminish the perception” (Paul et al., 2000, p. 58). Mason (1995) even proposed that the third-person effect is “a phenomenon without a clear process explanation (p. 612). Similarly, research has also failed to adequately explain what causes some individuals to be resistant to these persuasive messages (Paul et al., 2000). For example, according to Lasorsa (1992), 50% of a sample is susceptible to the effect and 50% is not. Research fails to thoroughly explain either side. However, while relevant, this criticism of the process does not negate the need to address its application into our current political structure. Therefore, this study aims to address the impact of celebrity endorsements through the perspective of the third-person effects hypothesis. As celebrities become eager to get involved in politics (Smillie, 1998) and voters increasingly take their political cues from celebrities (Marks & Fischer, 2002), it is important to understand the effects of using this campaign strategy on voters.

HYPOTHESES

Over the past decades, American culture has grown increasingly celebrity focused (Marks, 1999). Life, itself, has become entertainment-oriented, and the Washington-Hollywood connection has become much stronger. As celebrities endorse political causes and candidates, they may, in fact, affect the public’s views. Reports are conflicting on whether the barrage of celebrity endorsements made a difference in the 2004 presidential election. The conflicting reports may be due to the fact that, although individuals didn’t feel that they were affected, they may believe that others were.

Third-person effect predicts that people will overestimate the persuasive power of mass media messages on the attitudes and behaviors of others (Davison, 1983). In the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, did people believe that, although celebrity endorsements didn’t affect

them, they affected others who were less politically savvy or discerning of the persuasive media messages? Previous third-person effects research suggests two hypotheses.

Research suggests that, due to social distance, out-group messages lead to third-person effects (Meirick, 2004). People believe that their reference groups are less susceptible to the powerful media than out-groups and the public at large. Therefore, the first hypothesis addresses the third-person effect of celebrity endorsements based on social distance.

H1: Endorsements of the out-group candidate will be perceived to have a greater effect on others than on the self.

The opposite effect should occur for endorsements supporting the in-group candidate. Celebrity endorsements supporting the preferred candidate are considered to be desirable. Therefore, it is self-enhancing to receive those messages (Meirick, 2004). The second hypothesis addresses the opposite of the third-person effect, the first-person effect. Closer social distance through reference groups makes people accept media messages.

H2: Endorsements of the in-group candidate will be perceived to have a greater effect on the self than on others.

III. METHOD

This study focuses on the third-person effects of celebrity endorsements in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections to see if individuals themselves were affected, if they believe others like them (in-group) were affected, if they believe others unlike them (out-group) were affected, or if they believe the public at large was affected by the endorsements.

Data for this study were collected during the 2004 presidential election from 364 participants and during the 2008 presidential election from 253 participants. As reported by MediaVest (2004), 40% of young adults 18-24 years old were influenced by celebrity endorsements. Jackson (2005) found that young people's level of agreement with political statements made by celebrities increased with their adoration. Specifically, unpopular statements were made more palatable and already popular statements were agreed with more when stated by adored celebrities. Similarly, market research indicates that young adults were influenced by their attachment to celebrities when shaping their sense of identity and their feelings of self worth (Boon & Lomone, 2006). In addition, celebrity role models influenced young people's brand choices and attitudes towards brands (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004). Therefore, a college sample was appropriate for study of this trend, as the selling of politicians is often equated to the selling of product brands (Powell & Cowart, 2003).

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses. Participants were asked for demographic information, interest in the 2004 or 2008 presidential campaigns, intention to vote and political affiliation. In addition, they were asked "if the presidential election were held today, I would vote for ..." To allow in-group and out-group classification, participants were omitted if (a) they did not identify themselves as Democrat or Republican, (b) they identified themselves as Democrats for Bush (McCain) or Republicans for Kerry (Obama),

or (c) they did not intend to vote in the 2004 (2008) presidential election. That left 232 participants for analysis in 2004 and 166 in 2008.

The mean age for the 2004 sample was 20.31 ($SD = 4.14$). The sample was predominantly female (62.5%) and White (90.1%). The mean age for the 2008 sample was 21.18 ($SD = 4.23$). This sample was also predominantly female (60.2%) and White (92.3%). Political affiliation was split with 45.3% Republican and 54.7% Democrat in 2004, and 47.4% Republican and 52.6% Democrat in 2008. In 2004, 79.7% intended to vote in the presidential election, with 44.5% intending to vote for Bush and 46.4% intending to vote for Kerry at the time of the study. In 2008, 88.3% intended to vote in the presidential election, with 36.7% intending to vote for McCain and 51.6% intending to vote for Obama at the time of the study. Participants in the 2008 study were more interested in their election (mean = 5.59, $SD = 1.47$) than 2004 participants were in their election (mean = 4.25, $SD = 1.52$).

Students were asked to complete paper-and-pencil self-administered surveys. First, participants were asked to provide demographic information, including political affiliation. Second, they were asked about their voting intentions in the 2004 (2008) presidential election. They were asked the question, “If the presidential election were held today, I would vote for” with the response options, George W. Bush/Dick Cheney (John McCain/Sarah Palin), John Kerry/John Edwards (Barack Obama/Joe Biden), and I will not vote in the 2004 (2008) presidential election. In addition, participants were also asked to indicate their likelihood of voting for each candidate with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Third, participants were asked to indicate their level of political interest in the campaign. They were given the statement, “I consider myself to be interested in the 2004 (2008) presidential election campaign,” and provided response options ranging from 1, meaning *strongly disagree* to 7, meaning *strongly agree*. A single-item measure of political interest is the most common way to address the variable in the literature (Bybee, McLeod, Luetscher, & Garramone, 2001; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Tedin, 2001).

Fourth, the study examined the third-person effects of celebrity endorsements with a measure adapted from Meirick’s (2004) measure of the third-person effects of political advertisements. Participants were told of various celebrity endorsements of both George W. Bush (John McCain) and John Kerry (Barack Obama). Endorsements were chosen to represent a broad range of celebrity in equal support of both candidates. Comedian Dennis Miller, singer Jessica Simpson, and actor Bruce Willis endorsed George W. Bush, and actor Martin Sheen, singer Bruce Springsteen, and actor Ben Affleck endorsed John Kerry. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Curt Schilling endorsed John McCain, and Oprah Winfrey, Robert DeNiro, and George Clooney endorsed Barack Obama. After each endorsement, participants were asked (a) to rate each candidate on a 7-point Likert-type scale of favorability, with a range of 1 (*very unfavorable*) to 7 (*very favorable*); (b) to indicate whether the endorsement affected their impression of the endorsed candidate on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with a range of 1 (*much less favorable*) to 7 (*much more favorable*); (c) to indicate whether the endorsement affected their likelihood of voting for the endorsed candidate on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with a range of 1 (*much less likely to vote for him*) to 7 (*much more likely to vote for him*); and (d) to predict the

effect that the endorsement would have on Democrats, Republicans, and the general public's impression of the endorsed candidate and likelihood of voting for the candidate on 7-point Likert-type scales.

To establish in-group and out-group endorsements, endorsements were combined into two sets of data: Democrat endorsement and Republican endorsement. In an effort to eliminate any personal effect of an individual celebrity's endorsement, the responses for the three Democratic endorsements were combined and averaged. The same was done for the three Republican endorsements. For example, responses to the three questions that asked whether Jessica Simpson's endorsement/Bruce Willis' endorsement/Dennis Miller's endorsement of Bush affected Democrat's impression of Bush were averaged together for a single effect on out-group score for Republicans.

IV. RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 predicted third-person effects for celebrity endorsements of the out-group candidate. To test this, various paired-sample t tests were run on perceived effects of celebrity endorsements of the out-group candidate on perceived effect on self and the public in general, as well as progressively distant others (in-group, out-group). Perceived effects were measured through two variables: effect of the endorsement on the impression of the endorsed candidate and effect of the endorsement on the likelihood of voting for the endorsed candidate.

Hypothesis 1 was supported for both Republicans and Democrats in both 2004 and 2008. Participants of both party affiliations perceived the public to be more affected by out-group candidate endorsements than they were themselves for both their impression of the endorsed candidate and likelihood of voting for the endorsed candidate. In 2004, Democrats perceiving the effects of Republican (Bush) endorsements believed the effects to be significantly greater on the public than on their own likelihood of voting for Bush ($t_{(126)} = -5.258, p < .001$) and on the public than on their own impression of Bush ($t_{(126)} = -5.069, p < .001$). In 2008, Democrats perceiving the effects of Republican (McCain) endorsements believed the effects to be significantly greater on the public than on their own likelihood of voting for McCain ($t_{(100)} = -5.689, p < .001$) and on the public than on their own impression of McCain ($t_{(100)} = -6.202, p < .001$). In 2004, Republicans perceiving the effects of Democrat (Kerry) endorsements also believed the effects to be significantly greater on the public than on their own likelihood of voting for Kerry ($t_{(104)} = -5.594, p < .001$) and on the public than their own impression of Kerry ($t_{(104)} = -5.104, p < .001$). In 2008, Republicans perceiving the effects of Democrat (Obama) endorsements also believed the effects to be significantly greater on the public than on their own likelihood of voting for Obama ($t_{(89)} = -7.526, p < .001$) and on the public than their own impression of Obama ($t_{(89)} = -7.263, p < .001$).

However, when broken up by social distance, results were inconsistent with previous research on social distance. For both Republicans and Democrats, the effect of out-group candidate endorsements was perceived to be greater on the public, the in-group, and the self than on the out-group. In 2004, Republicans perceived Democrat endorsements to have a significantly greater effect on the in-group than the out-group for both impression of Kerry ($t_{(104)} = -6.115, p$

< .001) and likelihood of voting for Kerry ($t_{(104)} = -5.787$, $p < .001$), a significantly greater effect on the public than the out-group for both impression ($t_{(104)} = -5.165$, $p < .001$) and likelihood of voting ($t_{(104)} = -5.718$, $p < .001$). Republicans perceived Democrat endorsements to have a greater effect on the in-group than the public for likelihood of voting for Kerry ($t_{(104)} = 2.484$, $p < .05$) but not significantly greater for impression of Kerry ($t_{(104)} = 1.609$, $p = .111$). (See table 1) The same results were true for Democrats' perceptions of Republican endorsements. (See table 2)

In 2008, Republicans perceived Democrat endorsements to have a significantly greater effect on the in-group than the out-group for both impression of Obama ($t_{(88)} = -6.322$, $p < .001$) and likelihood of voting for Obama ($t_{(88)} = -7.854$, $p < .001$), a significantly greater effect on the public than the out-group for both impression ($t_{(88)} = -5.562$, $p < .001$) and likelihood of voting ($t_{(88)} = -6.7$, $28p < .001$). Republicans perceived Democrat endorsements to have a greater effect on the in-group than the public for likelihood of voting for Obama ($t_{(88)} = 2.568$, $p < .05$) but not significantly greater for impression of Obama ($t_{(88)} = 1.803$, $p = .075$). (See table 3) The same results were true for Democrats' perceptions of Republican endorsements. (See table 4)

Table 1

2004 Republicans' Perceived Effect of Out-Group Endorsements on Self and Others (N= 105)

<u>Impression of Out-group Candidate (Kerry)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.40**	.703				
Out-group	-.01	.387	-.39**	.649		
Public	-.32**	.644	.08	.505	-.31**	.611
<u>Likelihood of Voting for Out-group Candidate (Kerry)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.50**	.870				
Out-group	-.03	.426	-.47**	.826		
Public	-.37**	.675	.13*	.550	-.33**	.597

** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 2

2004 Democrats' Perceived Effect of Out-Group Endorsements on Self and Others (N= 127)

<u>Impression of Out-group Candidate (Bush)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.37**	.790				
Out-group	-.03	.613	.34**	.735		
Public	-.32**	.712	.05	.652	-.29**	.607
<u>Likelihood of Voting for Out-group Candidate (Bush)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.47**	.818				
Out-group	-.01	.582	.46**	.721		
Public	-.34**	.737	.12*	.668	-.33**	.633

** p < .001, * p < .05

Table 3

2008 Republicans' Perceived Effect of Out-Group Endorsements on Self and Others (N= 90)

<u>Impression of Out-group Candidate (Obama)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.75***	.866				
Out-group	-.24***	.593	.51***	.761		
Public	-.63***	.827	.11	.604	-.39***	.670

<u>Likelihood of Voting for Out-group Candidate (Obama)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.84***	.877				
Out-group	-.23**	.619	-.61***	.734		
Public	-.69***	.873	.14*	.534	-.46***	.653

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 4

2008 Democrats' Perceived Effect of Out-Group Endorsements on Self and Others (N= 101)

<u>Impression of Out-group Candidate (McCain)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.32**	.707				
Out-group	-.15*	.567	-.17*	.748		
Public	-.41**	.663	-.09	.490	-.26**	.613
<u>Likelihood of Voting for Out-group Candidate (McCain)</u>						
	Self <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	In-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Out-group <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	-.42**	.624				
Out-group	-.08	.534	-.33**	.613		
Public	-.37**	.659	.04	.468	-.29**	.548

** p < .001, * p < .05

Hypothesis 2 was not supported for either Democrats or Republicans in either 2004 or 2008. First-person effect occurred only for one condition. In 2004, Republicans perceived the in-group (Bush) endorsements to have a greater effect on their own likelihood of voting for Bush (self) than on the out-group's likelihood of voting for Bush ($t_{(105)} = 2.145, p < .05, M = .17, SD = .789$). For the remaining conditions, results of the paired-sample *t* tests substantiated a third-person effect for the in-group candidate's endorsements as well as for the out-group's candidate.

V. DISCUSSION

With the increasingly blurred line between Hollywood and Washington and the unprecedented support of Hollywood's biggest celebrities in the 2004 and 2008 presidential election campaigns, it is important to address the effects these endorsements have on the voters. Individuals often believe that they are not as susceptible to persuasive messages as the general public. They feel that they have information unavailable to other people; others are susceptible because "they" don't know what "we" know.

This study had two significant findings. First, people distanced themselves from the undesirable messages. Third-person effects were demonstrated in both Republicans and Democrats in that participants felt that the public would be more affected by the opposing, or out-group, candidate's endorsements than they themselves would be in both impression of the endorsed candidate and likelihood of voting for the endorsed candidate. Third-person effects occur due to self-enhancement. When a persuasive media message is seen as undesirable, a third-person effect occurs. Any endorsement of the opposing candidate, whether through celebrity endorsement or traditional political advertisement, was seen as highly undesirable. Therefore, through self-enhancement, third-person effects occurred.

Second, when broken up into in-group (their political party) and out-group (the opposing, and endorsed candidate's, party), the third-person effect was only significantly greater for the in-group, not the out-group, for both impression of endorsed candidate and likelihood of voting for candidate. Again, this may be due to the political polarization of the election. Previous researchers found that social distance plays a role in third-person effects. The further the group is from the self, the more susceptible they are to the persuasive message. This was not the case for celebrity endorsements. People recognized the partisanship that existed and knew that most Democrats supported Kerry or Obama, and most Republicans supported Bush or McCain, although this party support was not as strong as in 2008, with many Republicans becoming disheartened with the direction of their party and voting for Obama.

The most important implication of this study is that, in an election filled with political polarization, such as the previous two presidential elections, when people are very strong in their political convictions and often unwavering in support of their presidential candidate and overall, political parties hold their bases, a celebrity endorsement supporting a candidate will not have any room to influence voters' decisions because they are already in favor of the endorsed candidate. The in-group, however, does have the potential to be persuaded by the opposing candidate's endorsements. The results of this study were in line with the findings of previous

research on social distance (Meirick, 2004). Although people knew that they were too knowledgeable to be influenced by the opposing candidate's celebrity endorsement, they were concerned about others, within the general public and their own political party.

This study did not find first-person effects occurring due to celebrity endorsements. First-person effects traditionally occur because people find the message to be desirable, as it supports their point of view. Political advertisements deal with the candidates and their issues. People support both and, therefore, may feel close to the position. However, the stigma associated with celebrities in politics may have removed any self-enhancement that a supportive message typically holds. Whereas Democrats may support Kerry's or Obama's positions and assimilate advertisements that carry their message, they may see celebrities' politics as irrelevant and, therefore, distance themselves from Ben Affleck's political stumping. Although they know that they are above caring about what Ben says, they do not feel that others are. Therefore, others, in-group or out, are much more susceptible, regardless of the fact that it is in support of their own candidate.

VI. CONCLUSION

As celebrities become a more dominant force in our society and politics, it is necessary to address the effects of their involvement. In our society, individual citizens are barely recognized – usually only as a vote or campaign contribution. Yet, people desire recognition, and if they do not get it and celebrities do, they live vicariously through celebrities and subsequently revere those whom they support (Duncombe, 2007). Very little scholarly research exists on celebrity endorsements or political endorsements in general. This study makes an important first step at looking at the role they play in our perceptions of voting decisions, especially as it shows consistent results across two different samples over two election cycles. Future research needs to examine this in greater detail.

Future research should address the roles that individual characteristics, such as political interest, political knowledge, and political involvement, play in these effects. In addition, this study looked only at Republicans for Bush/McCain and Democrats for Kerry/Obama. Future research should also include those voters crossing party lines as well as undecideds and third-party supporters. These studies specifically addressed college students, as their age group is especially celebrity-focused and nearly half report being influenced by celebrity endorsements. However, future research should also look at 18-24 year old, non-college students in comparison to determine whether education plays a role. In addition, future research needs to begin to address the impact of celebrity endorsements on voters' own behavior.

If George Clooney is deemed influential enough to be paid to sell Omega watches and Oprah Winfrey can increase sales of a 130-year old novel, *Anna Karenina*, 5,421% simply by choosing it as an Oprah Book Club book, it is logical to assume that these celebrities would have a similar impact on the political world. However, with only 15% admitting that they would be positively influenced by Oprah's endorsement of a political candidate and 60% believing that her endorsement would benefit a candidate, a discrepancy clearly exists. It is important for political communication research to continue to examine this discrepancy as well as the greater impact of the endorsement.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As we move towards the 2012 presidential election, one likely to be even more celebrity-laden than 2004 and 2008, it is important to understand this cultural phenomenon. Obama, the current president and likely 2012 Democratic candidate, will bring with him his entourage of celebrity endorsements from 2008. In addition, the president was outright labeled a “celebrity” himself in a 2008 McCain ad, comparing him to the likes of Paris Hilton and Brittany Spears. On the Republican side, Sarah Palin continues to exert herself onto the political scene while at the same time becoming a “celebrity” in her own right. In 2009, Palin stepped down as governor of Alaska to pursue other interests. In 2010, her reality show, “Sarah Palin’s Alaska,” premiered on TLC, drawing 5 million viewers and breaking records at the network (Sehgal, 2010). The “docu-travelogue” has led some to question whether it’s a reality show or a campaign ad (Gold, 2010). In either case, the highly positive portrayal of the mother and frontierswoman sides of Palin is intermingling celebrity and politics in previously unseen ways. If Palin does become a contender in 2012, with Obama’s celebrity status and ties on the other side, it makes it all the more important to understand the effects of celebrity on voters. Future research will need to look not only at the effects of celebrity endorsements but the role of politicians as celebrities themselves.

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