

# Do Celebrities Make Policy?

JOHN STREET

## Abstract

Do celebrities exercise power over policy making? It can seem that they do, at least in the way the media reports their political activities. We need to think only of the coverage of the footballer Marcus Rashford's seemingly successful campaign to get the Johnson administration to change its policy on free school meals. But are such accounts to be trusted? This is a question whose answer has implications for how we understand and judge contemporary democracy. Celebrities, after all, are unelected and unaccountable. This article asks, therefore, whether it is plausible to claim that stars of popular culture are to be counted amongst the politically powerful.

**Keywords:** celebrity politics, Bono, policy making, post-democracy, mediatisation

## Introduction

THE FIRST WEEK of January 2024 witnessed a television drama, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, that was reported as galvanising British politicians into belated action in response to a scandal of more than two decades' standing. That same month saw Arsenal footballers and the actor Idris Elba launch campaigns to curb knife violence. The worlds of entertainment and celebrities were engaged in achieving, or attempting to achieve, policy change. Or at least that is how it seemed. This article asks whether it is indeed the case that celebrities, and the popular culture from which they emerge, can exercise power over policy making. Do celebrities, who are unelected and unaccountable, or television dramas, which are not bound by obligations of accuracy and truthfulness, influence public policy?

The media coverage of celebrities tends to assume that stars exercise power. In 2020, the British press reported that the Premier League footballer Marcus Rashford had forced a U-turn in government policy on free school dinners in half-term or in the school holidays. The *Evening Standard* claimed that 'ministers were being pushed towards a U-turn on free school meals over half-term after a campaign led by England football star Marcus Rashford'.<sup>1</sup> It was a claim echoed by the *Daily*

*Telegraph*. In *Prospect* magazine, Joanna George wrote that 'Marcus Rashford was able to successfully campaign and influence the UK government to extend free school meals through the summer break ... a serious and significant political achievement for someone inexperienced at political campaigning and who isn't a politician'.<sup>2</sup> The *i* newspaper ran a frontpage headline: 'Rashford 1 Johnson 0'. Rashford was later to appear at number forty-two in the *New Statesman's* 2023 'Left Power List'.

Rashford's putative influence over policy is importantly different from the celebrities who have acquired that power by the traditional route. People like Glenda Jackson and Sebastian Coe in the UK, or Peter Garrett in Australia, or Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine, or, of course, Donald Trump in the US. These people were celebrities before entering politics, but they acquired their political power through the ballot box. Rashford's power, if it is such, does not come via the ballot box. Like the TV chef Jamie Oliver, who campaigned with some success to improve the quality of school food, or the actor Joanna Lumley in

Tory,' *Evening Standard*, 21 October 2020; <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/ministers-closer-free-school-meals-uturn-rashford-a4572432.html>

<sup>2</sup>J. George, 'The rise of the celebrity as politician', *Prospect*, 23 June 2020; <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/marcus-rashford-boris-johnson-school-meals-celebrity-politicians-uk>

<sup>1</sup>J. Murphy, 'U-turn on free school meals looming after Marcus Rashford campaign backed by senior

her fight for the citizenship rights of Gurkha soldiers, or the rock stars Bob Geldof and Bono in their attempt to persuade the G8 nations to relieve the debt of developing nations, Rashford's influence was not the product of the formal institutions and processes of democracy. Bono alone, it has been claimed, was responsible for 'tripling the US budget for Africa.'<sup>3</sup>

But press reporting or self-reporting of such power does not constitute evidence of it. It may be true that Rashford's campaign received extensive media coverage, and that the government did indeed reverse its original decision. But these facts only establish correlation, not causation. The government denied that its change of heart was prompted by the efforts of a celebrity sportsman. The prime minister's spokesperson, when asked about Rashford's role, said: 'The PM welcomes his contribution to the debate around poverty and respects the fact that he has been using his profile as a leading sportsman to highlight important issues'.<sup>4</sup> On *Good Morning Britain*, the Minister for Children claimed that she, not Rashford, was responsible for the change in policy, and some of the press reports of Rashford's achievements suggested that these owed much to the support of MPs. It is, of course, no surprise that governments want to claim credit for themselves, and not to be seen as acting at the behest of footballers, actors and rock stars. In his autobiography, Tony Blair describes how his fellow political leaders took against being spoken to by Bob Geldof as if 'they were errant schoolkids'.<sup>5</sup>

Against this background of media claims and political denials, I want to ask whether there is any substance to the suggestion that celebrities exercise power over policy making. If there is, from where does this power derive, and does it pose a danger to the traditional forms of democratic accountability?

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in L. Partzsch, 'The power of celebrities in global politics', *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>Newsquest Digital Content Team, 'Government makes U-turn on free school meals after Marcus Rashford campaign,' *Bournemouth Echo*, 16 June 2020; <https://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/news/national/18522016.papers-say--june-17/>

<sup>5</sup>T. Blair, *A Journey*, London, Hutchinson, 2010, p. 554.

## The rise of the celebrity politician

Marcus Rashford is a recent example of a now long line of what have been termed 'celebrity politicians'. This phenomenon can take many forms. My concern is with those instances of individuals who, having acquired fame and media attention as a result of their cultural or sporting achievements, take up social and political causes, without seeking political office.

The rise of the celebrity campaigner is seen by some writers as a symptom of the failure of the traditional democratic process, what Colin Crouch has dubbed post-democracy, in which electoral politics has become a spectacle, and in which politicians perform the role of popular representative in a series of images and gestures—most recently to be seen in Ed Davey's campaign in the 2024 general election.<sup>6</sup> In such a world, a space is created for those skilled in performance, who also can make some claim to popular representation, based not on votes, but on fandom, sales or social media followers: the celebrity politician.

These political trends and processes are themselves closely allied to the transformation of political communication wrought by changes to the media landscape. Parties and politicians are more interested in Instagram posts or TikTok memes than set-piece interviews or party election broadcasts. And just as traditional politicians ally themselves ever more closely to popular culture, and campaign movements depend increasingly on celebrities to publicise their cause, so the figures within that culture become more involved in traditional forms of politics.

It might be thought that these developments do little to alter relations of power. They refer only to how politics appears, not what it does. There is, though, experimental evidence that celebrities can influence political choices and that celebrities differ—by genre and by credibility—in the extent to which they are able to exercise such influence. Other research has argued persuasively that endorsement by Oprah Winfrey boosted support in the Democratic primaries for Barack Obama. There is also evidence that celebrity involvement in a

<sup>6</sup>C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004.

cause can raise the profile of that cause.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, there are many examples of celebrities raising large sums of money for such causes—from climate change, famine and poverty, to injustices of all kinds.

But while this research gives some indication of the power of the celebrity, that power is typically confined to electoral politics and campaigning movements. There is much less about whether those celebrities are able to change policy. We have only the circumstantial evidence of the kind provided by Marcus Rashford, Jamie Oliver and others, where celebrity advocacy of a cause is followed by policy change. It begs the question of whether we are witnessing what Lena Partzsch calls ‘power with’, where celebrities serve as representatives of causes promoted by NGOs and others, which she contrasts with ‘power over’, where the celebrities themselves influence the policy outcome.<sup>8</sup> The former is how the media typically represents celebrity influence. The celebrity’s role is confined to supporting an existing campaign, or to helping manage the media messaging attached to a policy decision; they do not initiate the campaign or bring about any change in policy. It is the second possibility—‘power over’—that is my prime concern here. What would be required for us to claim that celebrities exercise power over policy making?

## Celebrity as charismatic power

A first thought when considering the possible influence of celebrities is to ask whether power derives from their ‘star power’, what Max Weber labelled charismatic power—‘specific gifts of the body and the spirit’—or Leo Braudy labels ‘the frenzy of renown’. There is some evidence of politicians being impressed

<sup>7</sup>C. Garthwaite and T. Moore, ‘The role of celebrity endorsements in politics: Oprah, Obama and the 2008 Democratic primary’, *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2013, pp. 355–384; D. Jackson and T. Darrow, ‘The influence of celebrity endorsements on young adults’ political opinions’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2005, pp. 80–98; A. J. Nownes, ‘Can celebrities set the agenda?’, *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2021, pp. 117–130.

<sup>8</sup>Partzsch, ‘The power of celebrities in global politics’, pp. 178–191.

by stars and with them enjoying what has been labelled ‘the halo effect’.<sup>9</sup> When the film stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt turned up at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2006, Dan Brockington describes them as being ‘mobbed’ by ‘star struck’ executives and others. Brockington says of politicians in particular: ‘they all love to meet celebrities.’<sup>10</sup> In his diaries, Alastair Campbell describes how Tony Blair liked mixing with rock stars. This might be a trivial feature of elite behaviour, except, as Campbell also notes, Blair would make time for Bono and Geldof that was denied to other—more traditional—political suitors.<sup>11</sup>

Such insights need to be set against the case of politicians who are unimpressed by or uninterested in celebrities. Madonna’s involvement in Malawian politics was largely unsuccessful because the political elite there knew nothing about her. Margaret Thatcher had her favourite celebrities, but appeared to care little for their political views. As Clinton’s Treasury Secretary, Larry Summers, remarked on being asked to meet Bono: ‘why waste precious time meeting a rock star with one name who sang with a band named after a spy plane?’<sup>12</sup> So, in assessing the influence of the celebrity on policy makers, we need to be wary of granting too much importance to their charismatic effects.

## Celebrity claims to representation

If sprinkling star dust is not enough to guarantee celebrity influence, there is another possible source: the claim to representation. As with any attempt at political influence, there is a need to persuade policy makers that you—the lobbyist—speak with authority,

<sup>9</sup>C. N. Dougherty and S. D. Phillips, ‘Under the influence: the celebrity factor in policy capture’, *Regulation and Governance*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2024, pp. 158–176.

<sup>10</sup>D. Brockington, *Celebrity Advocacy and International Development*, London, Taylor and Francis, 2014, pp. 114, 117.

<sup>11</sup>A. Campbell, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries, Volume One, Prelude to Power, 1994–1997*, London, Hutchinson, 2010, pp. 312–13; A. Campbell, *The Blair Years: Extracts from Alastair Campbell Diaries*, London, Hutchinson, 2007, p. 592.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Bono, *Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story*, London, Hutchinson Heinemann, 2020, p. 360.

whether that is based on the interests of a community or some form of expertise or special knowledge. What is true for political lobbying in general, is true for the celebrity politician.

Celebrities, by definition, have fans and followers; they are popular—Rashford has 9 million followers on Instagram. This popularity suggests a form of representation, or at least it can be presented as such. Bono himself has said: 'I don't have any real power, but the people I represent do. The reason why politicians let me in the door, and the reason why people will take my call is because I represent quite a large constituency of people.' And, he adds, this representative claim is 'in the minds of the people whose doors I knock upon.'<sup>13</sup>

The claim to represent is not based on numbers alone. When the actor Joanna Lumley took up the cause of Gurkha soldiers who were denied British citizenship, her claim to speak for them derived not just from her fame as an actor, but from the much-publicised fact that her father had fought in a Gurkha regiment. Marcus Rashford's claim to speak about school meals is grounded in his childhood experience. In a letter to MPs, Rashford wrote: 'My story to get here is all-too-familiar for families in England: my mum worked full-time, earning minimum wage to make sure we always had a good evening meal on the table ... as a family, we relied on breakfast clubs, free school meals, and the kind actions of neighbours and coaches.'<sup>14</sup> Other claims to represent are based more on expertise and knowledge, rather than experience. Jamie Oliver's campaign for improved school food rested upon his expertise as a chef. In advocating on behalf of those with HIV/AIDS, Bono claimed 'a certain moral authority that's way beyond your own life and capabilities,' derived from the organisation DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa) that he set up in 2002.<sup>15</sup>

But all such claims of representation, whether based on experience or expertise or numbers, also rest on media narratives that

contribute to, or undermine, the claim. The actress Emma Thompson's support for Extinction Rebellion, for example, was presented as 'hypocritical', following her flights to and from Los Angeles to campaign for climate change awareness. It can be undermined too by political scepticism about the depth of knowledge or experience being claimed.

## The power of persuasion

Seducing politicians with your celebrity status and claiming representation of a cause or community are only the first steps in any plausible story of celebrity influence. There is also the need to persuade politicians and/or policy makers to act. This is very different from persuading fans and others to donate money to an appeal or buy tickets for a performance. The organisers of Band Aid failed to persuade Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to drop VAT from the sale of their record 'Do they know it's Christmas?' Although Bob Geldof reports that, after Live Aid, President Mitterand invited him to lunch at the Elysée Palace, and that over the meal Geldof persuaded the president to intercede to get French food supplies into Sudan.<sup>16</sup> In her campaign for the Gurkhas' rights to live in the UK, Joanna Lumley met Phil Woolas, a Minister from the Home Office, and, according to *The Guardian*, 'exploited Home Office heavy-handedness to demand assurances from a sheepish Woolas after five former Gurkhas received letters from the Home Office apparently telling them they did not qualify to settle in Britain'.<sup>17</sup> Bono argues that, once in the room or at the table, celebrities can cajole politicians into doing what they might not otherwise do. Although he stretches the credulity of hard-nosed political scientists when he suggests that musicians, in particular, are good persuaders because they can speak the language of melody and 'a great leader has to have a great ear for melody ... an ability to see through the din and clangor of ideas and conversations and points of view, and hear the melody line, and realize: this is

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in *Bono on Bono: Conversations with Michka Assayas*, New York, Riverhead Books, 2005.

<sup>14</sup>M. Rashford, 'To All MP's in Parliament', 2020; <https://greenbank-primary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/marcus-rashford-letter-to-parliament.pdf>

<sup>15</sup>Campbell, *The Blair Years*, p. 407.

<sup>16</sup>B. Geldof, *Is That It?*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986, pp. 347-50.

<sup>17</sup>P. Wintour, 'Joanna Lumley confronts Phil Woolas over Gurkhas', *Guardian*, 7 May 2009; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/may/07/gurkhas-joanna-lumley-phil-woolas>

the thing we've got to do.'<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, there may be substance to Bono's romantic rhetoric when the politicians being persuaded derive from a similar world to him. In his autobiography, Bono describes a visit to Ukraine: 'Our journey is at the invitation of President Zelenskyy, who I met in Kyiv in the days when he was an actor and comedian ... Zelenskyy's second-in-command, Andriy Yermak, is a former film producer, and I feel that these are our kind of people, storytellers who want the Victory Day story to show.'<sup>19</sup>

But even if we accept that shared experience and a common language might enable the celebrity to exercise influence, there are many other obstacles to be overcome. Bono's autobiography is an interesting case study of the difficulties a celebrity politician faces and the compromises that have to be made. He talks of the need to win support from media organisations as well as political ones, of forming alliances across the political spectrum, and of allowing himself to be used to add publicity and glamour to the resultant policies.

For all the insights that Bono offers, he remains an exception. His engagement with the political actors and processes is not matched by that of Rashford and Lumley, and the many other celebrities who aspire to influence public policy. The reason for this may, of course, lie in part with the individuals themselves, but will also lie—to a much greater extent—with features of the political system itself. Just as the rise and prominence of celebrity politicians varies according to the culture and political constitution of states, so institutional factors play into the opportunity for celebrity influence.

## Institutional organisation and 'the talent': empowering celebrities

Celebrity power over the policy elite, if it operates at all, depends on some form of access to the policy process, which, in turn, depends on the networks and agencies in which policy making is embedded. This applies to celebrities as it does to other would-be participants. Brockington argues that access was easier for Geldof and Bono because they were 'part of

the inner teams'. In his evidence to the UK's Covid inquiry, Lee Cain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's press secretary, argued that Marcus Rashford's campaign was initially resisted by the government because he—or rather the experience he represented—was not in the room: 'I just think there was a lack of understanding of what families were potentially going through at that time—and, you know, this is solely just because I think people don't really—have never lived it'.<sup>20</sup>

Access and influence are dependent on resources. In Bono's case, DATA was a key resource. He also hired the former Labour MP Douglas Alexander, when the latter lost his seat in 2015, to drive 'initiatives aimed at catalysing greater investment within and beyond Africa to drive economic growth'.<sup>21</sup> The Hollywood actor Ben Affleck, who led a number of international development campaigns, depended, according to Alexandra Budabin, on 'lobbying that is coordinated by williamsworks (funder and adviser on philanthropic initiatives), ECI's (Eastern Congo Initiative) fiscal sponsor, New Project Venture, contracts with K&L Gates LLP, a Washington-based international law firm with over \$1 billion in yearly revenue.'<sup>22</sup> In this respect, celebrity influence is not that different from political lobbying of the traditional kind. It is about insiders and outsiders, about core and periphery. It may be different only to the extent that fame or popularity are valued by the processes that manage the opportunities to exercise influence.

This wary conclusion warrants a qualification. In dealing with ideas of celebrity, we are dealing with a media creation, a persona that exists in the way they are portrayed across multiple media platforms. The same might be said of politics itself. It has become commonplace to talk of the 'mediatisation' of politics,

<sup>20</sup>UK Covid-19 Inquiry, *Module 1 Report*, 31 October 2023, pp. 58–9; <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/>

<sup>21</sup>Bono's spokesperson, quoted by J. Pickard, 'U2's Bono hires Douglas Alexander as adviser', *Financial Times*, 29 November 2015; <https://www.ft.com/content/6babdf24-96b7-11e5-95c7-d47aa298f769?shareType=nongift>

<sup>22</sup>A. Budabin, 'Ben Affleck goes to Washington: celebrity advocacy, access and influence' in L. A. Richey, ed., *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations: Politics, Place and Power*, London, Taylor and Francis, 2015, pp. 142.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Assayas, *Bono on Bono*, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup>Bono, *Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story*, p. 247.

by which is meant the emphasis parties and governments put upon ‘presentation’ and upon influencing media agendas. It also refers to the talents or attributes of those selected for political office. To this extent, traditional politics has become a form of celebrity politics, witnessed—in its more extreme form—in the guise of Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Donald Trump. They too claim the right to represent based on their careers in film and television, and they too borrow from the world of entertainment in promoting their political ambitions. In such a world, the celebrity politicians of the kind discussed here—from Bono to Marcus Rashford—are part of this transformation too, and are possible beneficiaries of the opportunity to shape public policy. The celebrity is, by definition, a skilled user of media and is richly resourced in the currencies and skills valued by media and, increasingly, by politics.

## Conclusion

This article began with examples of those occasions when, at least on first viewing, celebrities are responsible for exercising power over policy making. There are, of course, many other examples where no such effect is discernible, let alone plausible. In the UK, celebrities were much in evidence in opposition to the Iraq War, without having any influence on key decision makers. Taking those examples where a policy effect might be discerned, I have suggested that there are a number of dimensions to be considered: charisma, ‘star power’ or the ‘halo effect’; claims to representation; powers of persuasion; institutional structures; and mediated presence.

Do these elements suggest that celebrity power is somehow special, and different from other forms of lobbying and influence? Can we say that celebrities, by virtue of their charisma, their claim to representation and their access to policy makers, are able to affect policy in ways not available to other political actors? If such power exists, it is contingent on the credibility and significance attached to the expertise and experience as well as the ‘popularity’ of the celebrity. Much depends on the extent to which politicians and others within the policy network share an understanding of these attributes and respond to them. Put simply, do traditional political

actors evince a fan-like response to the celebrities or recognise the stars’ right to speak about the issue at hand? Insofar as members of the policy community behave as ‘fans’ or accord special importance to the celebrities because of who they are, then we might talk of ‘star power’.

Such talk needs, however, to be hedged by the distinction between ‘power with’ and ‘power over’. It is contended by those who occupy elected office—and who work directly for them—that celebrities are to be used to support agendas already established. The G8 policy on developing country debt, by this account, was already in train, and the role played by Live 8—and Bono and Geldof—was to get the policy ‘over the line’. Similarly, in the case of Rashford’s school meals campaign, the argument is that he ‘succeeded’ in getting a U-turn from the government only because of the political support he received from elected politicians.

Set against these ‘power with’ interpretations are the ‘power over’ alternatives. In Rashford’s case, it is clear that the government was opposed to funding school meals at half-term and in the holidays, and would be risking political capital in changing direction. And the support that the campaign received from MPs might be understood, not as partners in a worthy endeavour, but politicians, worried about their declining electoral popularity, joining a celebrity who had won extensive media and popular support for his initiative. Something similar may apply to the dramatic rise in political interest in the plight of Post Office submistresses and sub-masters in the aftermath of ITV’s dramatisation of their treatment by the Post Office.

But, even in looking more closely at celebrity involvement in the policy process, it is important not to lose sight of the wider context. This context consists, first, of the political conditions that allow or deny access to the policy process. These conditions are set by the constitutional, institutional and ideological factors that make access possible or desirable for any lobbyist at any time. But they are also set in the current era by the wider features of a post-democratic order that puts a value on performance and spectacle and which has led to a personalisation of political communication. These trends may have served to elevate the entitlements—and powers—of the celebrity.

## Acknowledgements

A version of this article was first presented at the European Consortium of Political Research Joint Sessions in Toulouse in April 2023. I owe a considerable debt to the organisers of and participants in the workshop on 'Political Communication and Policymaking in the Age of Digital Media'.

*John Street* is an emeritus professor of politics at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of *Media, Politics and Democracy* and co-author of the forthcoming *Our Subversive Voice: The History and Politics of English Protest Songs, 1600-2020*.